

**HOW TO STAY CONNECTED IN AN ‘OFFLINE’ COUNTRY?
STORIES OF CUBANS’ INTERNET EXPERIENCE**

by

Xenia Reloba de la Cruz

A thesis submitted to the Cultural Studies Graduate Program

In conformity with the requirements for

the degree of Master of Art

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

(April 2019)

Copyright ©Xenia Reloba de la Cruz, 2019

Abstract

Since 2013, Cuban authorities have taken significant steps towards the regularization of public Internet access in the Island. Before that date, policies regarding the Internet benefited specific sectors and limited the broader access of most of the Cuban population. Cubans managed to stay current, creating original alternatives or adjusting pre-existing initiatives to get access to information and knowledge. This thesis explores some of the configurations that characterize the Cuban communicative ecosystem. Building on Don Slater's concepts of communicative ecologies and communicative assemblages (2013), I define the Cuban communicative ecosystem as the combination of online and offline alternatives to access information and enable communication needs. Such alternatives involve human agents, tools and media that work within institutional, irregular, and illegal networks. Those networks coexist, not necessarily in harmony, within everyday life in Cuba. Rather than disappearing with Internet access, the irregular and illegal aspects of the communicative ecosystem continue to emerge and develop, providing in some cases more suitable solutions in a context of scarcity. The emergence of irregular and illegal networks is an expression of agency in the face of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). I argue that Cubans' agency reflects a cultural sense of connectedness, based on imaginaries about modernity, modernization, development, and normality that have been part of Cuban tradition since its formation as a nation. I will approach the concept of modernity as a metaphor that expresses the goals and illusions of modernization and development. In the Cuban case, being part of modernity historically reflected an obsession to transcend geographical and intellectual insularity, embracing the global flows of technological and social modernization. Throughout this thesis, I seek to answer two central questions: What is the Internet adding regarding individual agency to the fabric of Cuban society? And how does the creation of alternative communicative structures, enriched by the Internet, relate to an inherent and mainly not deliberate sense of connectedness with a global community?

Keywords: Cuban communicative ecosystem; Internet access; agency; sense of connectedness; modernity

Acknowledgements

My co-supervisors, Dr. Susan Lord and Dr. Karen Dubinsky, started this story back in 2013 when they considered this topic relevant to a broader understanding of Cuban culture and invited me to share my empirical knowledge with their students in Havana. Without their insightful, respectful, and passionate regard for Cuban society and history, it would not be possible to be here now.

Susan Belyea took care of me throughout all my experience at Queen's University, but especially during the last months, while I was finishing the process of this thesis. Also, my friends and extended family in Kingston comforted me, bringing hope and solidarity every time I needed it. Scott, Sayyida, Paul, Jordi, Freddy, Zaira, Dairon, Kurt, Lubna, Rena, Sylvie, Canan, Ale, Amila, Rohit, Efkan, Jennifer, Yasmin, Saira, Hanna, and many others: I have a huge debt of gratitude with you. My professors, Dr. Scott Rutherford, Dr. Laura Cameron and Dr. Martin Hand, challenged my assumptions and helped me to evolve throughout this experience.

This thesis is a little fragment of a collective history still under construction. I owe it to all the persons in Cuba (and abroad) who agreed to participate in this research in any capacity. I have tried to be loyal to your concerns and dreams, despite the translations. I also owe it to all those who refused to participate, because in their refusal I found new questions and ways to approach my subject.

Last, but not least, to those friends (or 'friends') who nourished my wall on Facebook during these two years, bringing new ideas or the distractions that reminded me about my fun self while I was writing this thesis. I am especially grateful to Dami and Jogito, for being the first readers of these pages, and staying around while I was freaking out.

A mis padres, mi hermana y mi sobrino: saberlos es el mejor argumento para levantarme cada día a soñar.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms	v
Chapter 1 Going online: A Cuban obsession	1
Chapter 2 Cuban communicative ecosystem. Offline and online practices to stay current	23
Chapter 3 Cuban Agency and the Internet	60
Chapter 4 Conclusions	85
Bibliography	92
Appendix A List of Participants	109
Appendix B List of Experts	111
Appendix C Guide for conversations with Participants.....	112
Appendix D Guide for the interviews with the experts.....	113
Appendix E Free Association of Ideas.....	114
Appendix F Cuba, Internet and the World (sample of memorable quotes)	116
Appendix G Letter of Information/Consent (Participants)	120
Appendix H Letter of Information/Consent (Experts).....	122
Appendix I Guide for verbal recruitment.....	124
Appendix J GREB Clearance letter	125

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

2G, 3G, and 4G, the second, third and four generations of mobile telecommunications technology. The number increases proportionately to the information exchange rate.

ALBA-1, the undersea fiber optic cable between Venezuela and Cuba, named by the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (Alianza Bolivariana de las Américas, ALBA).

ADSL, Asymmetric digital subscriber line, a type of broadband communications technology.

CENIAI, Centro Nacional de Intercambio Automatizado de Información (National Center for Automated Exchange of Information).

CNIC, Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas (National Center for Scientific Research).

COMECON, Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, established in 1949 to coordinate the development of the socialist bloc of nations.

Cubarte, a Cuban network associated to the Ministry of Culture.

CUC, Cuban convertible currency.

DNA, the carrier of living organisms' genetic information, used in this thesis as a metaphor.

ETECSA, Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba, S.A. (Cuban Telecommunications Company).

FDD LTE, Long-Term Evolution (LTE) is a standard of wireless broadband communications for mobile devices; the FDD, Frequency Division Duplex comes from a migration path of the 3G.

GDP, gross domestic product.

GPS, Global Positioning System.

ICRT, Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión (Cuban Institute of Radio and Television).

ICTs, Information and Communication Technologies.

IMO, a messenger platform that allows for the living exchange of audio, video and text.

Infomed, Cuban national network specialized in Medicine.

InterNic, organization created to provide Internet information and domain name registration services.

LGBTQI+, gathers Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transsexuals, Queers, Intersexual, and other identities.

MHz, megahertz.

MINCOM, Ministry of Communications.

Nauta Hogar, ETECSA's brand for the Internet service in the households.

Nauta, ETECSA's brand for the connectivity services.

SNET, sometimes translated as Street Net (red callejera).

U.S., United States of America.

Wi-Fi, it has been assumed and generalized as the acronym for Wireless fidelity.

Chapter 1

Going online: A Cuban obsession

December 2018. The Cuban Telecommunications Company (ETECSA, by its acronym in Spanish) announced the beginning of Internet service for mobile phones. After months of speculations and tests, the information concerning the packages and prices was public¹. Less than a week after the introduction of the new service, I read mixed commentary on Facebook postings. Some of them announced the arrival of a new era: Now, we belong with the rest of the world. Others made jokes concerning the high prices, the amount of data covered by each package and what it represents in practical terms (“ETECSA, my package is running too fast,” wrote a young woman accompanying her post with a pensive emoji). Others cannot access the service, because it is limited to those with a device having 3G in the band of 900 MHz. I believe cautious happiness coexists with the relative disappointment of those facing new problems in the long history of Internet scarcity in Cuba².

The alternative of accessing the Internet on the phones was widely rumoured while I was doing my fieldwork during the summer of 2018. Despite the rumours, most of the

¹ The company provides four data packages: 600 MB for 7.00 CUC, 1 GB for 10.00 CUC, 2.5 GB for 20.00 CUC, and 4 GB for 30.00 CUC (ETECSA, “Internet en el móvil,” n.d.). All packages come with a bonus of 300 MB of national navigation. The packages have a validity of one month after the first connection. 1.00 CUC is equivalent to 1.00 USD. According to Cuban official National Bureau of Statistics (ONEI, 2018), the median income in Cuba is around 760 CUP (meaning around 30.00 CUC per month).

² According to a recent report by an independent media publication, at the beginning of the 3G tests, 35% of cellphones owners did not have 3G on the 900 MHz band (Boza Ibarra, 2018). A group of users will not be able to access the service unless they acquire a phone with 3G on that specific band. ETECSA sells several devices with that characteristic in its commercial offices. I asked the ETECSA Facebook page administrators about the prices. They gave me options between 75.00 and 135.00 CUC.

participants in my research were skeptical about the introduction of this service. A young woman complained about the lack of information and speculated about the prices. She expected they would be too high for her budget. Another woman was sure it would not happen soon, because “here [in Cuba] there is always a delay.” Skepticism aside, the Internet on mobile phones is already a fact. According to a quick exploration using my networks, many people are joyfully testing this option to see how it goes. From December 6 to 20, 2018, ETECSA clients acquired more than 700,000 data packages, mostly of 600 MB³.

When I started this project, in 2013, I was part of a privileged group. I had access to the Internet at my workplace since 1998, and at home since 2001, using a modem and a landline. Now, as I do not have 3G on the 900 MHz, if I need a good Internet experience, I still must go to a public wi-fi spot. Although my point of view has changed, the questions that led me to this research are essentially the same. Back in 2013, it struck me that people without access to the Internet were not necessarily isolated. Using a variety of alternative resources, they were able to construct parallel communicative structures that emulate my forms of access. After decades without changes in the policy of access, in 2013 ETECSA opened navigation sites in some of its commercial offices (cybercafe), and in 2015, the monopoly started providing access in public “hotspots.” Since late 2016, some

³ According to Omar Pérez Salomón, responsible of Telecommunications at the Central Committee of Cuban Communist Party (Canal USB, 2018). Between December 6, 2018 and January 7, 2019, ETECSA sold 759,294 packages of 600 Mb (7.00 CUC x package), 533,490 packages of 1 Gb (10.00 CUC), 55,553 packages of 2.5 Gb (20.00 CUC) and 26,444 packages of 4 Gb (30.00 CUC), which supposes more than 12 million CUC only in the first month of the 3G service (ETECSA_Cuba Servicios Moviles, 2019). A recent report by *Granma*, the official newspaper of Cuban Communist Party, reflected that 1.870.000 Cubans habilitated the 3G on their cellphones, and 40% are actively using one of the packages. The same report emphasized that the mobile service has 5.000 new users every day, and it exists 5.4 million of mobile lines registered (Antón, 2019).

neighbourhoods benefited with an ADSL service in the houses (Nauta Hogar), although the service officially started in March 2017 (Telecompaper, 2019). Finally, every person with an adequate cell phone, the financial resources, and/or the curiosity to test the service, can access the data packages. What is the Internet adding regarding individual agency to the fabric of Cuban society? And how does the creation of alternative communicative structures, enriched by the Internet, relate to an inherent and mainly not deliberate sense of connectedness with a global community?

Far from the “information highways”

For more than two decades, the main academic and media narratives about the Internet in Cuba have focused on the policies concerning public access. One of the most recurrent arguments claims that technological precarity in Cuba, determined by the U.S. embargo and aggravated in the Special Period⁴, affect the policies related to the Internet. Following that logic, Cuban authorities understood the Internet as a resource that should be distributed wisely to benefit the sectors called to lead the development of the country in a context of deep economic crisis (Valdés & Rivera, 1999; Recio, 2014; Hoffmann, 2004; Muñoz, 2018). “Cuba’s GDP shrank 34.8% in the four years following 1990 ... Total imports fell from more than US\$8 billion in 1989 to below US\$2 billion in 1994”

⁴ The U.S. financial and commercial embargo was decreed in the early 1960s, following nationalization of the United States properties in Cuba by Fidel Castro’s government. The embargo has several aspects reflected in different laws and regulations, but it significantly affects the economy and commercial trade. Among other aspects, it affects Cuban government’s transactions using the U.S. dollar. After Cuban Revolution, in 1959, and despite the U.S. embargo, the Island enjoyed two decades of relative economic stability, greatly due to the common economic system of the Soviet Union and the socialist community of nations (COMECON). When the socialist system fell in the 1990s, the Cuban government announced the beginning of the so-called Special Period. During that period, Cubans suffered scarcity at every level of their everyday lives.

(Hoffman, Vidal and Eckstein in Muñoz, 2018: 40). That was the economic background on the Island while the Internet was becoming a topic of public discussion worldwide.

Cuba had the highest telephone density in Latin America before 1959, but around 73% of those resources were in Havana, a tendency that started changing after the Cuban Revolution. As discussed by Hoffman (2004), Recio (2014) and Muñoz (2018), from 1960 to 1990 the policies concerning telecommunications prioritized a social rather than a commercial approach, and the disparities in the distribution of this service were progressively addressed. By 1994, less than half of the landlines were in the capital (Muñoz, 2018: 37). But when the 90s crisis became more evident in everyday life, Cuban telecommunications infrastructure consisted of a chaotic set of different technologies that barely worked together⁵. As pointed out by Hoffmann, “before the Revolution, Cuba had the highest telephone density of all Latin American countries, while the evolution of the sector from 1959 to 1994 gave Cuba the lowest growth rate in mainline telephony of virtually all Latin American and Caribbean countries” (Hoffmann in Muñoz, 2018: 37). According to Recio, second-hand technologies, low-cost and partial solutions were the “schema” that authorities presented as the only possibility to face the accumulated debts in that area (2014: 11). Valdés and Rivera (1999) suggest not underestimate the “seriously deficient condition of the country’s telephone infrastructure” as a factor explaining “the Cuban government’s lack of enthusiasm for a large, uncontrolled influx of Internet users” (145).

⁵ “Cuban authorities have calculated losses of 2,000 million dollars in the telecom sector since 1962 due to the blockade [embargo]” (Recio in Muñoz, 2018: 80).

Combined with the critical economic landscape, the technological precarity can be a plausible explanation for the centralization of resources (Valdés & Rivera, 1999; Hoffmann, 2004; Recio, 2014). The creation of the Cuban Telecommunication Company (ETECSA) could be a good example of that kind of strategy. ETECSA was born with the mandate of modernizing the telephone networks, among other purposes. The Decree 190 of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers (August 17, 1994) ceded ETECSA exclusive authority on all national and international telecommunication services until 2006 (Recio, 2014: 15). That authority was renewed in 2003. The organization became a monopoly leading the main tasks concerning infrastructures and services as part of the Cuban Informatization Strategy⁶. The Decree 321 of 2013 renewed ETECSA's rights and duties until 2036 (Cuba, Council of Ministers, 2013).

Besides the precarity, a remarkable aspect of telecommunications in Cuba during the 90s was the emergence of domestic networks as well as the first initiatives to connect Cuban nodes with other networks worldwide. Those initiatives preceded the dissolution of the Soviet Union but acquired a significant weight when economic circumstances affected the access to information in prioritized areas such as biotechnological and medical research, as well as tourism (Valdés & Rivera, 1999). We cannot separate the way those pioneer networks negotiated the scarce resources and developed initiatives to guarantee the opportunities of accessing and exchanging information from the individual actions that I

⁶ Hoffmann (2004), Recio (2014), and Olalde Azpiri (2018) have offered abundant information about the history of ETECSA, born as a joint venture between several organizations (including the Cuban state telephone company that at some point already controlled 51% of the stocks). For the purposes of this thesis, it is more relevant to recognize that ETECSA monopolizes all the telecommunication services in Cuba, as well as the tasks of modernization and informatization.

will analyze in this thesis. In its essence, both cases —the institutional and the individual— are examples of the same phenomena: the complications involved in achieving a competitive standard in the context of scarcity also affected by ideological considerations. The solutions those networks brought during the crisis also reflect Cuba’s high educational standards and a history of promotion of computer science and informational literacy that Hoffmann (2004) compares to the national literacy campaign in the 60s⁷.

Pedro Urra, one of the specialists in Infomed, Cuba’s first communications network for the medical community, remembers the circumstances that brought about this initiative. While the provisions of scientific journals and resources from the socialist nations were short supply, they built a network designed to allocate and share digital versions of the scarce contents. The specialists of Infomed anticipated a formula that could evolve to “normal” conditions of connectivity. They were knowledgeable about state of the art in their field and dreamt of full access as soon as such possibility was available in the Island (Urra, personal interview, 2018).

The first official attempt to start a systematic data connection from and to Cuba took place in 1992, after the Department of Ideology of the Cuban Communist Party

⁷ In 1960 the Cuban government initiated a literacy campaign that concluded a year later with around a 100% of Cuban population capable of reading and writing. Hoffmann (2004) highlights several moments in Cuba’s history of computer sciences. For example, Cuba acquired its first computers of Western technology early in the 1960s, and they were destined for the National Center for Scientific Research (CNIC). This example reflects the Cuban government’s recognition of the importance of computer science, and how it could contribute to the development of the Island. In 1969, the University of Havana opened the Center for Digital Research; and a year later Cuba had the first prototype of a Cuban-made minicomputer. The investment in computer sciences was systematic. In 1980, “Cuban Communist Party Congress emphasized the need to promote computerized telecommunications and data-based transmission facilities” (Valdés in Hoffmann: 200). An important actor in this history, the Cuban National Center for Automated Exchange of Information (CENIAI, by its Spanish acronym) was founded in 1982 subordinated to National Academy of Sciences (Hoffmann: 199-200).

authorized, on April 1991, the establishment of a Unix-to-Unix Communication from CENIAI (Cuban National Center for Automated Exchange of Information) to Web Networks, an affiliate in Toronto of the Association of Progressive Communication⁸ (Hoffmann 2004: 202). Once a day, a telephonic connection allowed for the exchange of e-mails between Cuba and the servers in Canada, and these latter redistributed to the world (Valdés & Rivera, 1999; Hoffmann, 2004). As Hoffmann puts it, “The connection via Canada was necessary since until 1994 the U.S. embargo also prohibited any data network communication between the United States and Cuba” (2004: 202). Meantime, CENIAI was experimenting with domestic networks based on the Internet Protocol (Hoffmann: 203).

Open or closed networks? The political dilemma

Although the technological and economic aspects affecting Internet access in Cuba have been relevant in the metanarratives about this subject, one argument has monopolized the attention of most of the scholars: the impact of ideological and political considerations in the policies of access. The reservations of the Cuban leadership regarding the potentially subversive power of the Internet were transparent. In a speech dated on August 5, 1995, Fidel Castro stated: “They [the United States] speak of ‘information highways’, new ways that serve to fortify this economic order, which they want to impose on the world, through propaganda and the manipulation of human mentality ...” (Hoffmann, 2004: 205). That

⁸ The Association of Progressive Communication was “an international computer network serving NGOs and citizen-activists pro ‘social justice, environmental sustainability and related issues’” (Valdés & Rivera, 1999: 144).

perspective was reproduced in different layers of Cuban society, mainly in those contexts focused on national security⁹.

The potential subversive nature of the Internet was not only in Cuban authorities' imagination. "The U.S. government and the Cuban exile community have given media a similarly high priority in their political conflict with the Castro-led government on the Island" (Hoffmann, 2004: 187). Platforms created to promote a political change in Cuba have been working since the 60s. With the approval of Torricelli-Law in 1992¹⁰, the role of media and telecommunications to advance that agenda became crystal clear (Hoffmann: 192). The collapse of socialism also encouraged the idea of "now or never" between a sector of Cuban migration and their representants in the U.S. government. As Muñoz puts it, "policymaking on the Island showed a very suspicious positionality with respect to the Internet as a tool for subversion" (2018: 9).

⁹ Hoffmann documents the criteria of Lieutenant-Colonel Ricardo Sánchez Villaverde, professor for Automatization at the Instituto Tecnológico Militar José Martí (Military Technological Institute): "As part of the hegemonic project of the United States [the Internet] represents an invasion *sui generis*, which is not led by marines but by the information which is moved via satellite, fiber optic cables and Hertzian waves" (2004: 205).

¹⁰ Concerning telecommunication services and facilities, the Torricelli-Law (United States of America, Congress, 1992) established, among other points that "Telecommunications services between the United States and Cuba shall be permitted," and "Telecommunications facilities are authorized in such quantity and of such quality as may be necessary to provide efficient and adequate telecommunications services between the United States and Cuba." However, it emphasizes that "Nothing in this subsection shall be construed to authorize the investment by any United States person in the domestic telecommunications network within Cuba." It adds that "For purposes of this paragraph, an 'investment' in the domestic telecommunications network within Cuba includes the contribution (including by donation) of funds or anything of value to or for, and the making of loans to or for, such network." Furthermore, the Helm-Burton Act (United States of America, Congress, 1996) reinforced both, the prohibition, and the obligation of the President to present a biannual report about "payments made to Cuba by any United States person as a result of the provision of telecommunications services authorized by [Torricelli-Law]." Both Acts are currently active, and the third chapter of Helm-Burton's Act was recently implemented, extending the impact of this regulation to third nations trading with Cuban government.

However, coexisting with the political concerns, the capacity of the Internet to aid the nation's development was at the center of the discourses about the necessity of Cuba's full access to the so-called information highways. The discussions were already turning towards an argument that presented the Internet as more than a mere supplier of informational resources. According to that discourse, "Cuba" did not have to conform with a passive role online. The Internet could be a mean to propagate ideas from the perspective of Cuban authorities¹¹.

Despite the technological and economic precarity and the ideological and political concerns, on March 23, 1996, Carlos Lage —then secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers— emphasized at the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party the importance of computer-based communications. Lage affirmed that "in spite of our blockaded circumstances, we are in a relatively good position [to face the challenges of scientific and technological changes], due to the educational and scientific work developed by the Revolution" (Valdés & Rivera, 1999: 147; Hoffmann, 2004: 207-208).

Between 1995-96, the Island took important steps toward belonging to and using the Internet. On January 12, 1995, CENIAI received a Class B Internet address provided by a U.S. organization (InterNic), an action that permitted Cuba to join the Internet (Valdés

¹¹ In an interview with Cuban news agency Prensa Latina on September 1995, the head of CENIAI, Jesús Martínez, underscored that point (Valdés & Rivera, 1999: 147). Prensa Latina came back to that argument in 1996 when pointed out that "Cuba, with full access to Internet information services, expects to be an active supplier of information and not just a passive recipient" (Valdés & Rivera, 1999: 147). This idea is relevant to understand that Cuban authorities very early understood the possibilities of Internet for enhancing agency. When I write Cuba between quotes, I am emphasizing the fact that the whole nation is presented (and represented) from the perspective of the Cuban government or its spokespersons.

& Rivera, 1999: 146). In June 1996, the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers approved the Law-Decree 209 that regulated “the administrative competencies and structures for computer networks and Internet services” (Hoffmann, 2004: 208). In August, ETECSA and Sprint Corporation (U.S.) signed a mandatory monthly renewal agreement for a 64 Kbps satellite connection at the cost of 10,000 USD per month (Recio, 2014). This amount represented —without any doubt— a significant expense during the Special Period. Investing on connectivity within Cuba’s economic circumstances demonstrates the priority of this topic in the government’s agenda. Cuba joined the Internet on October 11, 1996. In a speech, the then Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized the possibility of accessing “an international patrimony of knowledge used by some 36 million clients of 160 nations.” He also highlighted “the efforts of hundreds of specialists” that made possible the access “to some 34,000 databases of the amplest spectrum of social, political, economic, scientific and sports information” (Valdés & Rivera: 149).

As stated in Law-Decree 209/1996, the government favoured a narrowed institutional access to the Internet, as a means of relieving the economic crisis, while constraining public access for most of the Cuban population (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Hoffman, 2004; Venegas, 2010). Recio (2014) emphasizes the selective nature of access stressed in the articles 12, 13 and 14 of the Law, as well as the concerns about security (Recio: 19).

On June 1999, Ramiro Valdés —a historical leader of Cuban Revolution then heading the Informatic sector— declared: “This end of the century is marked by the technological convergence of industries which until recently were independent of each other. This convergence ... finds its supreme expression in the vertiginous growth of the

Internet ... These so-called information technologies are the core of a multi-dimensional transformation of economy and society” (Hoffmann, 2004: 211). That discourse is correlative with those emphasizing the precarity as the main argument to restrict services beyond a group of prioritized areas. A representative of the Cuban Ministry for Informatics and Communications pointed out in September 2001:

Cuba does not escape the general situation of Third World countries where costs for Internet access are very high ... Because of this, there are limitations on the free opening of public Internet services, in order that in this first phase we can guarantee the scientific and academic centers, the health system and other government services are not adversely affected by an offer which at the moment surpasses the real technical and infrastructural possibilities of the country (Hoffmann: 214).

Meanwhile, we witnessed the increasing sense of urgency about the process of informatization¹². Such urgency was consistent with an aspect of Cuba’s political identity: a little country that rises over obstacles to present the best figures in social development when compared to Latin American and Caribbean nations, and even to some ‘First World’ nations¹³. Although sometimes the informatization appeared to live more in the discourses than in ‘real life,’ during those initial years of the 2000s ETECSA, under the rule of the Minister of Informatics and Communications¹⁴, started a dramatic renewal of

¹² During the early 2000s, I witnessed both public and private discussions on this matter. Besides the apprehensions concerning cybersecurity stressed in several documents about networks and access during that period and even today, there were increasing concerns related to the digital divide.

¹³ The emphasis in Cuban advances was a core element of Fidel Castro’s political discourse from the 70s to the 90s. He usually included in his speeches comparative references to the U.S. social system. I base my statement on my recollections while growing in Cuba during that period.

¹⁴ The Ministry of Informatics and Communications was created in 2000, by Law-Decree 204. It unified the previous tasks of the Ministry of Communications with several groups already working in the informatic area on the Ministry of Industries (Siderurgy, Mechanics and Electronics). In 2013, as a result of a new restructuring process, the Council of Ministers determined the functions of the renamed Ministry of Communications. A recent document (Cuba, Council of Ministers, 2017) establishes among other functions the responsibility of guaranteeing the conditions of technological sovereignty and maximum security of the Cuban system of communications. The emphasis on national security has been in all the regulations related to telecommunications in Cuba. For a summary of some of those regulations, see Recio (2014). More information is available in Spanish on www.mincom.gob.cu.

telecommunications infrastructures. As Recio puts it, “after 2000 we witnessed a sustainable development based on the reparation of telecommunication infrastructures and networks, which propitiated the interconnection of networks and services” (2014: 14). This process included the conversion of the analog telephone system into a digital one¹⁵.

2008: The economic turn

Following Fidel Castro’s illness, in 2006, Raúl Castro assumed temporarily the Presidency. As one of his first actions, he called public debates about Cuban society. As a result of the concerns raised during those debates, a new set of priorities, signed by an economic turn, informed the program of the late stage of the Cuban Revolution¹⁶. The new economic policy led by Raúl Castro included several reforms designed to relieve the crisis that affects all the layers of Cuban society. Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López (2013) summarize the nature of those reforms in three classes: administrative measures, nonstructural changes, and structural reforms. I will briefly focus on the second group. As Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López put it, the nonstructural changes do not involve altering the core of the system but rather provide access to services and possibilities previously vetoed to Cuban citizens (2013: 182). Among those measures, we can identify the deregulation of mobile

¹⁵ A press report pointed out that near 99% of Cuban landlines are digital (Hicuba, n.d.).

¹⁶ The document “Lineamientos de la política económica del Partido Comunista de Cuba” has been analysed in Recio (2014), taking into consideration the references about information, the Internet, and informatization. One aspect of the analysis underlines the emphasis on the technological approach to the process of informatization.

phones. Prior to this, only selected sectors of the Cuban population and foreign residents had access to mobile services¹⁷.

During an intense period between 2010-2014, the academic and media discussions focused on the emergence of an incipient civil society in a still very reduced virtual public sphere in Cuba (Calvo Peña, 2010; Henken, 2010; Hoffmann, 2011; Duong, 2013). However, something else was happening underground—or, to be more precise, under-sea. Following a series of agreements with the Venezuelan government, a submarine cable (ALBA-1) arrived at Santiago de Cuba’s coasts in February 2011. The ALBA-1 linked Cuba to Venezuela, opening the door to an option that had been consistently impeded by the regulations related to the embargo¹⁸. Although the cable arrived early in 2011, we did not hear any news until July 2012, when the Venezuelan part announced ALBA-1 was already operative. On January 24, 2013, ETECSA made a press release confirming the news, but with qualifications: “When the testing process concludes, the full operation of the undersea cable will not necessarily translate into the automatic multiplication of current possibilities of access” (ETECSA in Recio, 2014: 46). ETECSA also pointed out that it

¹⁷ Prior to the changes, the cellphone services were only provided to foreign residents or to certain areas within the State sector. They were understood as a commodity, a radical change after a traditional social approach to telecommunication services. That tendency to commodification has increased with the new measures. Today, Cuban population’s cellphone use is highly determined by the contribution of the migrants’ remittances. Muñoz (2008) has referred to the commodification of mobile services. I will briefly come back to this topic in the next chapter.

¹⁸ “Although surrounded by undersea cables that connect the U.S. with South America, Cuba had never been able to access those cables. The financial and commercial embargo forbids the access to telecommunications, hardware and software coming from any American company or subsidiaries” (Recio, 2014: 7). As Muñoz (2018) puts it, by allowing solely Sprint’s satellite connection, the U.S. condemned Cuba to low bandwidth traffic until the arrival of the fiber-optic cable ALBA-1 from Venezuela. As a result of several negotiations, exemptions have been applied over the last few years, some were included in the Torricelli-Law, others were enabled by Barack Obama’s government. However, Cuban authorities have been reluctant to accept those changes without suspicion. More recently, Donald Trump hostile discourse about Cuban government added fuel to the already contentious matter (Federal Register, 2018).

would be “necessary to execute investments in the internal telecommunications infrastructure and increase the resources in foreign currency destined to pay Internet traffic” (Muñoz, 2018: 65).

Between cautious notes and growing expectations, Cubans were surprised by Resolution 146 of 2012, by the Ministry of Communications. The document authorized Cuban citizens to hire Internet services in the locations where the capacities were already created to provide this service (mainly hotels and postal offices). An hour of international navigation cost 6 CUC (the equivalent to 6 USD), and the price of using international e-mail was 1.50 CUC (Recio, 2014: 22; Muñoz, 2018). From there to the opening of public sites to surf the web, the route was relatively fast. The navigation sites opened in 2013 with a price of 4.50 CUC per hour of international navigation. The expectations about having access at home were increasing. Wilfredo González, then vice-ministry of Communications, declared that “whereas the full access at home was in the horizon, the priority, in the *current circumstances* continues to be in the public hotspots, in order to cover a bigger number of persons with a more discreet investment” (Elizalde and Lagarde in Recio, 2014: 34, the italics are mine). Summarizing the rationale behind Cuban policy concerning the public access, Rosa Miriam Elizalde points out that “Cuba needed to construct a project of social and intensive access ... It is pure common sense. If you have to distribute the connection capacity of one hotel¹⁹ you only have two choices: you can give it to a little group of persons or look for an alternative that allows for the widest and most rational use of that resource” (Recio, 2014: 34).

¹⁹ Due to the technologic and economic restrictions of access, it was *vox populi* that Cuba’s whole access was similar to a five-star hotel’s access. Apparently, Elizalde is referring to that idea.

In December 2018, ETECSA started offering the 3G service. One of the participants in my fieldwork is using the mobile Internet. “It is ok,” he says, but he also thinks “the relationship between the prices and the packages offered is not ok. I already used two packages, because I expended the first package in three video chats.” A second participant told me she is afraid to use it because she does not know how it works. Also, if video chats consume most of the megabytes, she will probably continue going to the wi-fi spots. A report by an independent media confirms such impressions (Roque, 2018), while another participant makes me notice that some wi-fi spots in our neighbourhood (Vedado) are notably empty these days. In the National Assembly, the President, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, referred to informatization as one of the top-priority areas of his agenda. Notions like digital governance, digitalization and services online have meanings that, at least in the discourse, transcend the technological turn to enter into the domain of rights²⁰.

Defining a concept

To understand the landscape where the Internet is becoming more and more significant to Cubans, I reviewed some of the main concepts framing the studies about the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the practices related to the Internet. According to Couldry (2012), we owe to Matt Fuller the “attempt to develop a materialist account of media ‘systems’ and media ‘objects’ via the concept of ‘media

²⁰ As I stated before, a discourse focused on technological aspects of informatization has prevailed; however, I notice a slight turn in the discourse of President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, who places the notion of rights to access the information in his agenda, speaking about digital governance and civil participation (Figueredo Reinaldo; Concepción; Doimeadios Guerrero; & Pérez, 2018). Although, high prices and digital differentiation affect those intentions.

ecologies” (36). While the term is useful to reflect on “the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter,” it “bypass[es] the role that representations play in explicit practices of social ordering” (Couldry: 36-37). Couldry adds the notion of media-related practice, a “loose and open concept” to examine what “people (individuals, groups, institutions) [are] doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts” (37). This approach allows us to place agency at the top of the analysis.

Slater (2013) disputes an approach focused only on the technological aspect in his attempt to understand practices taking place in the specific local conditions of the southern nations. His broader concerns are related to the unbalanced distribution of roles in the process of constructing knowledge. As Slater emphasizes, “southern experiences are regarded not as *sui generis* histories to be traced and lived but as merely local instances of global development logics (progress, modernization, information society) that are defined in the North” (2013: 3). As he puts it, ethnographic practices tend to reinforce the inequality in the production of knowledge, where the South provides the data, and the North elaborates the knowledge. Slater proposes the neologisms “communicative ecology” and “communicative assemblages.” Following Latour’s notion of “infra-language,” Slater’s loose categories should serve to encompass “the ways in which new media [are] entering into the wider communicative processes of the locale” (2013: 31). Defining communicative ecology for his fieldwork in 2002 in Sri Lanka, Slater considered “the whole structure of communication and information flows in people’s ways of life”, and “the complete ensemble of (symbolic and material) resources for communication in a locality, and the social networks which organize and mediate them” (2013: 42). Using what he calls an

“empty and banal concept,” he focused on the local strategies that people used to construct “stabilized ways of communicating” (42). In Slater’s definition, communicative ecologies “do not contain media [... but] communicative assemblages,” and these latter “should focus attention on the heterogeneous and skilled engineering of stable or routinized systems for accomplishing communication” (2013: 47). Slater invites us to consider how “a co-configuration of human users and material tools ... distributes agency through their interaction” (49).

Slater’s approach is useful to understand the Cuban case because it reflects the fact that the media are “mediated through social practices, purposes and relations.” At the same time, this approach acknowledges that “everyday life is made up of many different communicative resources that messily combine or conflict” and that “to be a skillful communicator [one] is generally to be able to orchestrate a range of resources into practical and sustainable action” (2013: 43). Discussing Couldry’s notion of media practices, Slater remarks that although useful to understanding the place of representations in the communicative processes, it focuses on the existence of “supersaturated” media environments, which does not apply in certain parts of the world.

Building on Slater’s concepts of communicative ecologies and communicative assemblages (2013), I define the Cuban communicative ecosystem as the combination of online and offline alternatives to access information and enable communication needs. Such alternatives involve human agents, tools and media that work within institutional, irregular, and illegal networks. Those networks coexist, not necessarily in harmony, within everyday life in Cuba. Rather than disappearing with the Internet access, the irregular and illegal aspects of the communicative ecosystem continue to emerge and develop, providing

in some cases more suitable solutions in a context of scarcity. The emergence of irregular and illegal networks is an expression of agency in the face of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). I argue that, besides the most practical reasons driving the creation of such networks (e.g., for profit), the individual agency in these cases also reflects a cultural sense of connectedness, based on imaginaries about modernity, modernization, development, and normality that have been part of Cuban tradition since its formation as a nation. I will approach the concept of modernity as a metaphor that expresses goals and illusions of modernization and development. In the Cuban case, being part of modernity historically reflected an obsession to transcend the geographical and intellectual insularity, embracing the global flows of technological and social modernization. I will further develop these ideas in chapter 2.

Approaching the field: questions, goals, and methodology

According to Bennett (2005), the ambiguity of the concept of everyday life and its taken-for-granted nature complicates social, cultural and media studies concerning day-to-day practices. To respond to the complexities of researching any process within the frame of everyday life, Brinkman (2014) suggests a pragmatic pluralism, which translates into a comprehensive methodology that allows us to represent the complexity of our subject. Brinkman refers to an ontological triangle that contemplates three aspects of the subject: the phenomenological aspect (the experiences related to the subject), the discursive aspect (the meanings attributed to the subject), and the material aspect.

I undertook qualitative research combining ethnographic methods of fieldwork, a review of the academic literature, and constant observation and recollection of media

narratives. However, I focused on a group of individual narratives about the Internet experience. I sought to understand these perspectives within the context of the meta-narratives of official state and media discourse. My research questions are as follows: Which are the key components of the Cuban communicative ecosystem? What does the Internet add to that ecosystem? Which are the main beliefs, expectations, and frustrations associated with the Internet? Which are the alternatives —if any— to overcome the frustrations? How do Cubans' Internet experience relate to a sense of connectedness to the global? I also considered the intersection of those questions with other issues emerging in Cuba, mainly the role of transnational relationships in the participants' experiences.

The goals of my project are:

- To analyze the Cuban communication ecosystem within a broader cultural context, linking it to Cubans' cultural sense of connectedness.
- To discuss agency related to the Internet and its applicability to the specific conditions of Cuba.
- To map the current Internet's practices and how they affect Cubans' everyday lives.

Based on my empirical knowledge of the field, and using my networks, I identified two main groups of valuable informants, representing typical approaches to the Internet in the Cuban context. These groups can be broadly identified following the main practices and meanings their members attribute to the Internet. In the first case, the participants understand the Internet mainly as a tool to communicate with families or friends; in the second, as a productive media that articulates other significant areas of their everyday lives,

such as their professional development or their private businesses. Over four months I interviewed 33 participants. I started all the conversations with a question: How did you know about the existence of the Internet, and what is your life story with this media? I applied the free association of ideas' technique seeking to reveal meanings attached to the Internet and the wi-fi experience.

I labelled significant parts of the interviews (quotes and anecdotes) under thematic codes that could contribute to recognizing how the participants manifest the main categories of analysis: agency and sense of connectedness. For the agency, I structured the analysis considering three levels linked to the current notions on digital divide and digital differentiation: how they negotiate the access; how they qualify their skills and practices; and how their practices translate into knowledge. Concerning the sense of connectedness, I considered two subcategories: pre-existent notions about the place of Cuba concerning the world —emphasizing on the ICTs—, and the meanings, references and imaginaries attached to notions such as information, knowledge, and the Internet.

During my fieldwork, I observed the dynamics in five wi-fi spots in Havana: two on a residential neighbourhood (El Vedado), a hotel (Capri), a centric working-class neighbourhood (Centro Habana) and a distant working-class neighbourhood (Regla). I randomly tested the quality of the access, assessing its speed, security, and stability. I tested the Connectify experience²¹ and an app developed by a Cuban entrepreneur²².

²¹ The Connectify hotspots are the result of initiatives that capitalize the access provided by ETECSA in the public wi-fi spots. The providers of Connectify operate in little groups, mainly at night. They redistribute the wi-fi signal through hidden servers. They offer access cheaper than the institutional access, which renders this option very popular in Cuba. I will develop this topic in the next chapter.

²² After the economic reforms in Cuba, in 2008, and as part of the second wave of authorized jobs for the self-employment sector, there was a significant increase of independent businesses based on the development

I interviewed seven experts who provided me with their opinions concerning the history of institutional networks in Cuba, the impact of the Internet in the Cuban economy, socio-cultural impact of access (mainly among the youth), Cuban communicative practices, and the relationship between migration and communicative practices. I received hundreds of news alerts related to the Internet and Cuba that allowed me to assess the main topics raised by media. I witnessed two theatrical shows, and I followed a YouTube animated series related to the Internet experience in Cuba. This secondary set of data complemented my observations and the narratives collected.

Thesis outline

In chapter 2, taking as point of departure the participants' narratives, I approach current notions about "being modern" in Cuba, and how these imaginaries complement others about the normalization of Cuban's conditions in the specific context of the ICTs. I also analyze what I define as "sense of connectedness" in its relationship with the recent Cuban migratory history, and the increasing importance of transnational family within current communicative processes using the Internet. In the last section, I map some of the most frequent communicative assemblages that inform the Cuban communicative ecosystem, setting the context to analyzing agency.

of mobile apps and services. Those apps are conceived to work within the conditions of access in Cuba. They have functionalities that work offline, and their databases can be updated online and offline. Any user can update the apps offline within the "clinics of mobile phones," whose main service is repairing and maintaining all kind of electronic devices. During my fieldwork, I tested another kind of app (ETK), which main contribution is to articulate in a simple, very efficient tool, all the functionalities of ETECSA's services (from mobile services to Internet access). ETECSA's services are accessible through very disperse websites that, according to my tests, can fail during the processes of log in and log out, which rends the clients an impression of insecurity. During my fieldwork an official media recommended ETK as a secure option to access the Internet (García Díaz, 2018).

In chapter 3, I discuss notions of agency within the context of the Internet, focusing on the academic narratives related to Cuba. I compare those notions with my findings in the field. I also briefly discuss current literature concerning digital divide and digital differentiation. Based on my case studies I analyze how the digital differentiation affects agency concerning the Internet in Cuba.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize my findings and, taking into consideration the new developments in Cuba, I suggest other routes for understanding the Cuban communicative ecosystem.

Chapter 2

Cuban communicative ecosystem.

Offline and online practices to stay current

It was almost noon, a regular Saturday in Havana. My interviewee chose to meet me in my neighbourhood, El Vedado. “It’s like going for a walk,” she said. She wanted to talk, but she was a little cautious: “Can I record this conversation?”—She asked. I agreed²³.

Two icy lemonades later she gave me some inspiring conclusions:

We are free, you know? We can be the way we want to be. But we also need to know what’s going on around us. We need to have direct access to the news, *like everybody else in the world*. It doesn’t have to be like in capitalist countries, because we live in a socialist country. But we must be *at the same level ... I don’t want to go on living in an old fashion world. I want to have modern things*. I want to have better opportunities, in my house, in my everyday life, in my work ... That’s why I think technology can be very important ... *Being modern is not a positive or negative thing. It’s just normal*²⁴.

Lisandra is 25 years old²⁵. She has “some friends” on Facebook, and a close relative living abroad. She works in an official institution, and her access to the Internet in the office

²³ During the fieldwork I was advised several times, in conversations with friends and colleagues, that potential interviewees could receive me with suspicion. According to them, the discussions of communication and specifically the Internet have been politically charged for such a long time that there is a collective perception that any approach to this subject has political implications. I did not share that concern. However, one of my first interviewees, who accepted to talk after being initially hesitant, told me later that “it wasn’t [as] bad” as he expected. During the process of recruitment, I constantly experienced a similar apprehension. Once, I approached an adult couple in an attempt to recruit them. The woman told me that if I recorded them their voice could be recognized, and she declined. Other potential interviewee who initially said yes, later avoided the encounter without giving me any explanation. Usually, it was me who asked the participants to record their answers. The reversal of the normal practice in the case of Lisandra suggests the existence of this kind of suspicion concerning any approach to the Internet and Cuban communication ecosystem.

²⁴ All the interviews were in Spanish. The translations are mine. In some cases, I emphasize meaningful ideas with Italics.

²⁵ I changed the name of all the participants to protect their identity. For a list of participants (pseudonyms, when required) and basic demographic data, see the Appendix A.

is very limited. During the conversation, she measured every word. However, after sharing nearly an hour of conversation, she stressed her frustration concerning Internet access. She considers the prices of access very restrictive for someone like her, with a monthly State income. She also has a list of criticisms about the differentiated distribution of access. In her discourse, she equates the Internet to accessing information and emphasizes its importance to achieving “modernity.”

Lisandra’s notion of modernity equates other notions appearing in the interviews during my fieldwork. Other interviewees also present the Internet as a step towards “civilization,” “progress,” and ultimately, “normality” (or being like everybody else in the world). Several weeks before meeting Lisandra, I had a conversation with another woman, Eliana, whose observations captivated me:

Eliana: Cuba has one of the worst Internet access in the world.

Me: How do you know that?

Eliana: Because I read it on the Internet (*she laughs*).

Me: Does it matter to you?

Eliana: Of course! *We can’t deny development*. If we don’t want to lag behind, we need to go there [the Internet]. I’m not talking about me. I’m satisfied because I’m not a young person. But the new generations are frustrated. *They want to have more access. That’s what makes development possible*.

Throughout the interview, Eliana (55 years old) proved to have a very basic approach to the Internet. In her case, having Internet access means —almost exclusively— a better chance to talk to her son, who has been living in the United States for eight years. For economic reasons, he has not had the opportunity to come back to the Island since he left. For Eliana, almost everything on the Internet is about IMO, a free video-chat platform that works “pretty well” in Cuba because, among other reasons, it does not consume much connection resources. Once a day, she goes to a wi-fi spot near her house, she connects and

expends around ten minutes video-chatting with her son. This was the way she witnessed her grandsons' births. After several attempts to visit the United States, she has not yet been granted a visa. So, IMO is the alternative that allows her to be a "normal" grandmother.

However, despite her limited experiences about the Internet, Eliana worries because she considers that the lack of access is a handicap for Cuba's development. Eliana's story resonates with others collected during my fieldwork. She considers hers to be a typical example of Cubans' interaction with the Internet. She states, emphatically, that "we need to solve this thing [the Internet access] ... The signal should be in the houses ... It must be free [cheaper, she clarifies later] ... *The current limitations are making impossible communication among Cubans on the Island and abroad. Worldwide, everybody can get access, and here we have this limitation ... What I want is what everybody here wants.*"

Eliana's notions about the role of Internet facilitating and practically guaranteeing both the nation's development and the good functioning of Cuban transnational family are central to understanding the narratives I discuss in the following pages. In the first section of this chapter, I analyze my interviewees' perceptions about modernity, progress and development, and how those notions intertwine an aspiration to normality in a country largely marked by "exceptionality." In the final section of the chapter, I present some configurations coexisting in Cuban communicative ecosystem.

Modernity?

Most of the academic narratives that I have reviewed concerning the Internet in Cuba acknowledge the existence of alternative practices to complement scarce access to the global flows of information. However, the questions about inner motivations of people

seeking alternative forms of access remain unsolved. The notions of modernity, development, “civilization” and progress grabbed my attention because of the reappearance of these concerns in data I collected during my fieldwork. I argue that historically, as part of the process of national formation, and despite the weight of geopolitical isolation, by emphasizing notions about modernity and progress, Cubans developed a sense of connectedness and belonging to the global flow of knowledge and information, a status considered “normal.” Furthermore, I believe that besides being a central argument to seek systematic communications, migration also has an important role in nourishing Cuban notions about modernity and the aspiration to “normality.”

Modernity has become a metaphor that translates —among other aspirations— the possibility of benefiting from global technological flows. As Appadurai remarks, media narratives —mainly those in popular culture— have contributed to rewriting modernity “more as *vernacular globalization* and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies” (1996: 10). Appadurai (1996) and García Canclini (1995) emphasize that modernity is a process culturally and unevenly experienced worldwide; it is also an “embodied sensation” (Appadurai 1996: 2)²⁶. For the Latin American context, García Canclini underlines the convergence of features of modernity with traces of tradition, which results in hybrid cultures. Such hybridity affects significant aspects of Latin American societies (like political organization and cultural policies), as well as Latin Americans’ self-reflection on the local and regional identities.

²⁶ According to Appadurai, “One of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science is that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment —call it the modern moment— that by its appearances creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present” (1996: 2-3).

Appadurai provides a plausible explanation to understand everyday micronarratives about modernity, including those shared by the participants in my research. “For many societies, modernity is an elsewhere, just as the global is a temporal wave that must be encountered in *their* present” (9, Italics in the original), he explains. Appadurai’s ideas are coherent with Miller’s reflection on modernity (1995). According to Miller, in the local, “the peoples we study ... view themselves in direct relation to an explicit image of modern life” (1). He suggests that we reflect on “how the interpenetration of a sense of being modern and being traditional is mapped onto a shifting hierarchy and competing claims to legitimation” (5).

In the Cuban case, thinking about modernity as a synonym of modernization, frequently conveys the idea of development that necessarily connects to the global flows of information and knowledge. In post-1959 Cuba, the aspiration of modernity also reproduces a tension between a sense of belonging to those currents of development and a fear of losing national identity or, even worse, sovereignty. Slater (2013) points out that development is “normatively, even common sensically narrated as a transition to unimpeded and technically enabled global informatization flows and associated forms of organization and sociality (‘networks’)” (1), while globalization is “one kind of development narrative, a narrative of social transformation focused on increasing densities and speeds of interconnection” (23).

If we apply these notions to the specific context of Cuba, we can explain the processes through which everyday narratives that I collected equate modernity with an aspiration of development strongly intertwined with the global flows of information. Both modernity and development are still experienced as an *elsewhere*, among other reasons

because one of the main features associated to the globalization narrative—an easier access to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), mainly the Internet—has been largely banned in Cuba. As I explained in the first chapter, the public access to the Internet is a recent feature of Cuban communicative ecosystem. The narratives I present seem to reproduce a struggle between historical notions of Cuba’s place in the world—its aspiration of being modern—and a persistent status of geopolitical isolation. As Cuban scholar Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez affirms, “[Cuba] has never conceived itself disconnected from international cultural flows. Since the Island was inhabited [by the Spaniards] and connected to the rest of the world, Cubans’ lives were affected by the flows coming into and going out of the Island. The capacity to articulate that connection marked the national life...” (personal interview, 2018). This assertion is on the core of Lisandra’s and Eliana’s stories on access, but as I discuss throughout this section, it appears even implicitly in the rest of the interviews. I believe it could give another meaning to Cubans insistence in recreating online environment in conditions of poor connectivity.

Constructing a modern country thanks to/despite geopolitics

Building on the exhaustive study by Louis A. Pérez Jr. about the relationships between Cuba and the United States (1999), we can affirm that as part of the nationalist discourses growing in Cuba throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cubans emphasized the place of ‘modernity’ within the national identity. Being modern was a synonym of being civilized, and the new Cuba emerging from the colonial period needed to be civilized to overcome the old metropole rationale about the ‘always loyal island of

Cuba²⁷. According to Pérez Jr., “Technological innovation reached Cuba early and easily, often the instant it became available in the United States ... Innovation and renovation became the imperatives driving production, the means, too, by which Cuba was integrated into advanced industrial modes of the North” (18)²⁸. During the twentieth century, Cubans continued to fulfil their aspirations to modernity following the United States’ model. Cubans adopted the United States’ standards as their own assuming that those standards affirmed not only modernity and progress but also success and status (Pérez Jr., 1999: 141; 147).

Cuban scholar and journalist, Rosa Miriam Elizalde affirms that Cuba has been a country “absolutely opened to modernity.” In her opinion, that openness precedes the United States’ intervention at the end of Cuban Independence war (1898), but it strongly depends on the relationship with the North American neighbor. As she states, “Cuba was a polygon for testing all the technological developments coming, in general, from the United States. Therefore, in Cubans’ DNA, in its national roots, it exists this kind of

²⁷ It was common practice during the colonial rule that wealthy families sent their heirs to Spain and other European nations to complete their instruction. Cuban popular culture has emphasized the ideological transformation of some of Cuban best-known intellectuals and independentists (Cuban National Hero José Martí is a vivid example) thanks to that contact with a world deeply impacted by the French revolution and the English industrial revolution. The American revolution’s impact is also relevant. As Pérez Jr. states, during the late nineteenth century, Cubans felt already separated from their colonial metropole and drawn to the circle of United States’ economic and cultural influence. The idea of “being modern” was intrinsically related to the process of identity formation, and “the proposition of Cuba as modern and civilized [became] a condition very much at the heart of the people Cubans believed themselves to be ... Cubans early acquired *the vanity of modernity*, and nothing changed during the first half of the twentieth century except that this sensibility became much more deeply invested in the claim to progress and civilization” (1999: 346, 348).

²⁸ Some examples illustrate this point. “The railroad arrived during the 1830s... and by the 1890s Cuba claimed the highest ratio of railroad lines to total load mass of all Latin America” (Pérez Jr., 1999: 18). The Telegraph started in 1851, five years after the completion of the first successful system in the United States (ibid.). In 1881, Havana had its first telephone service, and by 1889, the city already possessed a municipal telephone exchange, “only a decade after the establishment of the first commercial exchange in the United States” (73).

relation, very open, two-ways, with the latest technological developments” (Elizalde, personal interview, 2018).

Stories about Cuba’s privileged stance towards technologies, if compared to other Latin American countries, proliferated in narratives about the Island —and Cubans’ imaginaries— during the first fifty years of the twentieth century²⁹. Throughout that period, together with the increasing mobility of people between Cuba and the United States, the ‘American modernity’ invaded the Island thanks to its effective mechanisms of spreading popular culture. The aspiration of modernity translated into values, products, and technologies ‘made in the USA,’ a notion that prevailed until the end of the 1950s when the less publicized aspects of the unequal relationship between Cuba and the United States also contributed to the success of Cuban revolution in 1959. Together with the narratives that placed modernity in the United States, there was also an aspiration to sovereignty³⁰. As Rowlands notes for other nations, in the Cuban case the dilemma during the twentieth century also was “How to become modern and remain the same” or “how to develop without becoming dependent” (in Miller, 1995: 23).

²⁹ Cubans were proud because “by 1921, [the island] had the largest number of telephones per capita in Latin American” (Pérez Jr., 1999: 328). Cuba was also a pioneer in Latin America for having the first radio broadcasting, in 1922 (331). “In 1950 Cuba became the first country in Latin America to broadcast TV programs. Eight years later it was among the first countries in the world to transmit colour broadcasts” (333). These examples invite to consider some elements that nourished Cubans’ notions of modernity. From the origins of their identity formation, Cubans received the United States modernizing influence as a form of subverting the impact of the strict rules imposed by Spain.

³⁰ Again, the prolific literary and journalistic production of Cuban Hero José Martí contains abundant examples of that struggle between the idea of modernity incarnated by the United States, and the fear of being swallowed by a nation that very early proved to be insatiable and claimed control over the rest of the continent. Those fears would find its confirmation at the end of Cuban Independence war, in 1898, when the United States and Spain excluded Cuban leaders from the negotiations on Cuba’s status. That decision initiated the United States occupation of Cuba (1898-1902) and created the basis for a political subordination radically interrupted after 1959, with the Cuban revolution.

After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the narrative of progress and development did not disappear; on the contrary, it started coexisting with a new narrative focused on social advances. The fact of being a developing country was also part of the revolutionary discourse incarnated by Fidel Castro's leadership. Castro's speeches tended to emphasize the importance of Cubans' achievements within the context of Latin America, some developed countries, and even the United States. Cuba's 'special condition,' as a David vs. Goliath, isolated but struggling anyway, added value to the epic dimension of constructing a different and fairer society from a disadvantaged point of departure. The aspiration of a different kind of development emphasized the creation of human capacities that would allow the country to get the place that it deserved in the global orchestra of nations. Fidel Castro's political discourses are the ultimate example of reframing Cuba's geographical meaningless (in terms of size), to present a nation meant to be relevant within the global context³¹.

While the revolutionary discourse was gaining spaces, Cubans preserved some ties with the United States, mainly with the popular culture produced in that nation. Despite the rupture of relationships between the governments of Cuba and the United States, the flow of news, movies, music, and other representations of popular culture, although frequently interrupted, has been systematic. As scholar Fidel A. Rodríguez points out,

³¹ As stated during the first chapter, the development of computer sciences occupied since the beginning of the Cuban revolution an essential place in this aspiration of progress. Elizalde underscores the fact that Cuba was the first Latin American nation developing a prototype of a computer in the 1960s (personal interview, 2018). However, with the entry of Cuba within the mechanisms of the socialist community of nations, the discourse of development related to computer sciences entered an impasse. Even within that limiting context, Fidel Castro suggested in a speech, around the late 1970s, early 1980s that "every Cuban should have a computer" (Elizalde, personal interview, 2018).

In the Republic, the North American cultural flow was remarkable, and even a political change such as the Revolution could not produce a complete rupture ... Even in the most radical cases of censorship —namely the prohibition concerning the music of the Beatles [the late 1960s, early 1970s]— there is evidence of the evolution of those processes [circulation of banned products of popular culture], accounts about using the resources of the ICRT [Cuban Institute of Radio and Television]³² to copy and reproduce the Beatles’ vinyl records contributing to the [underground] distribution of that music during that period (personal interview, 2018).

In a panel published by *Alcance* —Cuban Communication Journal— scholar Anna Christina Pertierra emphasizes that “the consumption of media in Cuba characterizes by the simultaneity of contradictory processes of rupture and connection.” She points out that “a general perception exists that Cuba is disconnected from global media, because of economic and political reasons. And that is true, but it does not result in a complete disconnection. At the same time, Cubans experience access that becomes more instantaneous every day, and it connects them to various global flows of media and cultural contents” (in Machado and Rodríguez, 2016: 149).

Overcoming isolation. Seeking normality?

Cuban scholar Antonio Benítez Rojo, in his seminal book *The Repeating Island*, refers to Antilleans as peoples continuously searching “the centers of their Caribbean-ness,” which constitute them as “one of the twentieth century’s most notable migratory flows” (1992: 25). Benítez Rojo remarks that Antillean’s insularity “does not impel

³² Cuban Institute of Radio and Television is the State monopoly in charge of creating and circulating audiovisual cultural contents. Although new ICTs provide autonomy for the creation of independent materials, ICRT continues to rule the public distribution of that kind of content in Cuba. This way, the products that do not fit the ICRT’s regulations will have to conform with the (until now) less influential online space or other alternatives that I will approach later in this chapter.

[Antillean's peoples] toward isolation, but on the contrary, toward travel, toward exploration, toward the search for fluvial and marine routes" (ibid.).

Dianelis, a young professional, shared with me her notions on Cuban isolation, and how that condition affects perspectives about knowledge and otherness.

I believe that the first element that makes our relationship with almost everything so special is the fact that we live on an island. An island that has been disconnected for a long time. Putting that [disconnection] aside, you can see that everything that comes from abroad results in a curiosity. *We have an innate curiosity to learn how things work outside.* Maybe it's just me. But I have always thought that one of the characteristics of being an island, is that we are curious about everything happening outside.

Dianelis' version of Cuban Internet history is passionate and reveals different levels of struggle and adjustment. As a significant part of her family lives abroad, trying to normalize the communications "between both shores" appears to be a regular occurrence for her throughout the years. In order to have regular communication with her family, when she was an undergrad student at the University of Havana, she used to write messages offline, and helped by the person in charge of a computer's lab, she was able to send news every day³³. When she needed a document available online, instead of expending the few hours she had on her student account, she sent one of her siblings the links. On the other shore, her siblings would download the document, and Dianelis received a pdf file, minimizing the resources and time needed to complete those processes in Cuba. In her case,

³³ As explained in the first chapter, Cuban authorities prioritized specific sectors to provide social Internet access. Universities were among those sectors (although that did not reflect equally in every School or Department, according to my interviewees). However, the regulations concerning access were clear: it was for social purposes or researching, and personal use was in some cases vetoed, in others, observed cautiously. According to my interviewees, they used access for personal purposes anyway, but it did not feel comfortable, or completely legit.

the reasons to seeking access seem obvious: getting access to information and communication. But more surprising is the testimony of Nancy, a self-employed woman in her thirties who recently decided to pay for the Nauta Hogar service, even though she does not have “any relevant relationship with anyone abroad,” and she does not need “any special information for developing or succeeding in [her] work.” When I asked her why she opted for such expensive service (15 CUC per 30 hours each month) if it does not seem so relevant for her everyday life, she replied: “*Nobody can live outside civilization. If you need any information, you look for it on the Internet. It’s a window opened to the world.*”

Previously, I discussed how the notions of modernity and civilization are historically tied to ideas of technological progress and development in Cuba. How do those notions —frequently fused in the interviewees’ narratives— relate to an aspiration to normality? Pérez Jr. points out that the adoption of modern patterns coming from the United States brought Cuba “*the appearance of normality* at the start of the twentieth century ... Cubans set about the task of rebuilding their lives under very difficult circumstances, where the material elements and the moral imperatives of what passed for normality were largely North American ones” (1999: 157). Is it possible to affirm that the ideas of modernity, civilization and development stressed by my interviewees also relate to the pursuing of “normality”? What role does geopolitical isolation have in those imaginaries about “normality”? Implicitly or explicitly, the participants in my research expressed concerns about living behind the standards of technological progress. In some cases, they measure Cuba’s modernity according to the place the Island occupies in the distribution and experience of the ICTs worldwide.

Juan Mario is 73 years old. Now retired, he used to work in a scientific institution. He had access to the Internet when that possibility was almost an urban legend for most of the Cubans on the Island. During our conversation, he underscored the fact that his life story related to the Internet was, to some point, “normal.” When he thinks about other Cubans with a different approach to the Internet, one of the words that he suggests is “anxiety.” The current circumstances of access to the Internet provide the opportunity to appease such anxiety. “Concerning the Internet, we have been isolated, not geographically, but for other reasons, systemic reasons. The systemic is not necessarily related to the geographic. It relates to the domain of ideology. *The Internet opens a window. It makes you believe that you can leave that isolation,*” he states.

On the other hand, Lester was born in the age of millennials. However, he feels that such label does not apply to his experience. He considers that Cuban history concerning the Internet put him in a sort of generational hole. Although he was born in the right time, he could not access the right tools. He is an outsider. For him, Cuban informative and geographic isolation has a psychological impact. “You feel a sort of claustrophobia. There is *a typically Cuban style of claustrophobia. And you can see how that sense of claustrophobia feels attenuated after the Internet. So, the Internet has a symbolic value, and a psychological impact,*” he emphasizes.

Throughout the analysis of the narratives of these experiences of life within the Internet, it seems clear that there is a confluence of notions about being connected, overcoming isolation, becoming modern, and seeking normality. As part of the techniques used during my fieldwork, I invited the participants to associate the Internet with a word or an idea that summarizes their feelings concerning that experience. I obtained 26 words

or short sentences (see Appendix E). Few of them (three) linked the Internet experience with specific circumstances: platforms or networks (Internet = Facebook; Internet = wi-fi), and the complexity of access (Internet = fatigue). However, the main meanings attributed to the Internet experience relate to values such as information, communication, and knowledge. Some answers explicitly linked the Internet with notions about being modern and development. Among the most illustrative phrases are: “Knowing the world,” “A window opened to the world,” and “Professional growth, success.” Others identified the Internet as a source of happiness, hope, and as a synonym of the future. In general, beyond this specific exercise, the interviewees tend to establish a connection between the process of accessing the Internet and notions about being modern reflected as integration to the rest of the world, which supposes to be “the normal.” An interviewee emphasized that “Nothing compares to the Internet,” and another encompassed the Internet within the word “everything.” Curiously, only two of my interviewees immediately associate the Internet with the “family”³⁴.

I decided to add the word “wi-fi” to the exercise. The results were striking. While the participants mostly reflected on the universal values of the Internet experience, the

³⁴ It is common sense to assume that within the Cuban context, the main activity related to the Internet continues to be communicating with family and friends abroad. I tested that common sense comparing my notes taken during systematic observations in several wi-fi spots in Havana, the interviews with the participants in my research, some conversations with experts, and the results of an ethnographic research developed by an undergrad student of the School of Communication (University of Havana) in an overpopulated neighbourhood of Havana (Oramas, 2016). Although I could not access any quantitative data about practices online, based on my sources, I agree that establishing fluid and regular communication with families and friends is still the primary goal pursued by Cubans on the Internet. However, other practices are emerging, and the interviews that I conducted tend to confirm that even in those cases where interpersonal communications are the primary goal, practices of self-representation, media activism, self-education, and searching of alternative information sources, are progressively increasing. I will come back to that aspect in the third chapter.

everyday practices in the specific context of the public wi-fi spots provided a more limited narrative about this later experience. Most of the participants tended to remark on the conditions of the public wi-fi spots, mainly in negative ways. Disconnection, frustration, hot, hard, difficult, a park, a park bench, a signal, craziness, the sun, phenomenon, necessity, were some of the words associated with the wi-fi experience. Only five participants attribute overtly positive meanings to the wi-fi experience: communication, happiness, opportunity, fast, union (family). How to read the nuances in the meanings associated with the Internet experience and the wi-fi experience?

Based on a broader analysis of the interviews, we can infer that the meanings attributed to the Internet result from the sum of the “real experience” and preconceived beliefs related to the Internet. Those preconceptions come from different sources, including family, friends, alternative forms of information, and more recently the Internet itself. Even before having access, some of the interviewees believed that the information found on the Internet was validated, and therefore, having access gave them authority when discussing any topic. Others had heard that on the Internet, “you can find a lot of information without having to invest many resources searching for it.” For others, knowing that the Internet existed, and not having the opportunity of accessing was a source of yearnings. I believe that those imaginaries add to the real experience, to enrich the perspectives of those that participate in the Internet experience, even of those which only goal is to guarantee a fluid channel of personal communications. The Internet is seen as a specific communicative resource, but it also carries a symbolic value. On the other hand, the precarity of the public wi-fi spots and the high prices of access reduce the wi-fi experience to the basics.

A brief analysis of some memorable quotes appeared on the interviews shows the importance that the participants attribute to comparing their context with what happens — or supposedly happens— worldwide. In the corpus I collected it seems relevant the use of phrases stressing the aspiration of “being like everybody else in the world” (see Appendix F). I believe that this set of sentences is illustrative of some of Cubans’ obsessions concerning the Internet. Furthermore, they express the frustrations and expectations surrounding the Internet experience in Cuba at the time I completed the fieldwork, as well as the role of the Internet reproducing the imaginaries associated to the access in the Island.

The weight of migration

Cuba’s history is strongly tied to successive migratory waves that started during the colonial period and continued throughout the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century. The history of colonial times offers enough evidence of migratory processes enforced by Spanish authorities to avoid the constant disruptions created by the political dissidents. However, as scholars like Pérez Jr. prove, during the first half of the twentieth century there was a continuous flow of people between Cuba and other nations, mainly the United States, and such movements were not necessarily connected to political arguments (1999). I will briefly focus on the migratory experiences after the Cuban Revolution, and how those processes intersect communications, affecting family ties.

The ideological approach to migratory processes after 1959, negatively impacted family dynamics. The sociologist María Ofelia Rodríguez, expert in demographic studies and migrations, recognizes that “there was a politicization of migration, very conditioned by the United States policies concerning Cuba, and the participation of the first migratory

wave happened during the first days after the triumph of Cuban revolution, as a key instrument in those policies” (personal interview, 2018). There is a consensus about the evolution of migration, as well as its representation in the political discourse in Cuba during the last decades (Aja *et al.*, 2017; Rodríguez & Díaz Varela, 2017). “Cuban migration has varied, and it is more heterogeneous now, as heterogeneous is Cuban society,” states María Ofelia Rodríguez (personal interview, 2018).

After two migratory waves significantly signed by political positionalities, in August 1994, thousands of Cubans left the country in improvised rafts, moved, mostly, by economic urgencies³⁵. This migratory movement, also known as “Balseros crisis,” is relevant to my research. Cuban authorities framed the Balseros crisis as an economic-driven movement justified by the Special Period, ergo, disassociated, at least in the public discourse, of political dissidency. At the same time, following that wave, Cuban migrants’ remittances gained more relevance as an element that kept the migrants connected to their families in the Island. In my opinion, those elements facilitated the progressive restoration of family ties. They also opened the doors to a more fluid and natural communication between both shores of Florida Strait.

³⁵ The first migratory wave took place during the initial months of the Cuban revolution. It comprised, basically, middle and high-class Cubans, as well as people related to the defeated regime. They settled mainly in Miami and contributed to creating an iconic city where Cuban and other Latin American identities flourish until nowadays. The second wave was the reaction to the 1970s, following processes of repression against intellectuals, religious beliefs, and LGBTQI+ communities. Known as the Mariel crisis, it exploded in 1980, when a group of persons willing to migrate took the Peru embassy in Havana. Following that incident, the Cuban government opened the borders, allowing the entry of rafts and minor ships to facilitate those persons to leave the country. Between the waves, there were also processes of dialogue and consensus. During the last decades, the idea of reconciliation has gained adepts, which translates in a more fluid —although very unequal— relationship between authorities and Cuban migrants. Most of the information concerning these processes are public domain, and it is not the purpose of my thesis to get into the details.

According to my empirical knowledge of this later migratory process, I believe the migrants' remittances exceed the financial support to families, and include less quantifiable values, such as information and the cultural experiences that "Balseros" acquired in the new society they lived. Echoing what another Cuban scholar, Ana Niria Albo calls the "cultural suitcase," María Ofelia Rodríguez refers to those processes as "social and cultural remittances" (personal interview, 2018). That concept encapsulates a two-way bridge that allows for the transmission of cultural values. Lifestyles, aesthetic patterns, fashions, and other values are visible now in Cuban streets (Rodríguez, personal interview, 2018). While Cubans abroad must adjust their beliefs and traditions to their new context, Cubans in the Island also receive, and appropriate new traditions imported by their friends and family abroad. Without this kind of exchange, some of those traditions would remain strangled³⁶.

According to Valdés and Rivera, on October 1994, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission approved agreements between the Cuban telephone enterprise (ETECSA) and U.S. telephone companies to offer direct telephone service between the two countries; a service that became available on November 25 (1999: 146). After that, the connections have been quite unstable, but despite incidents that tend to disconnect Cubans from both shores, when the 2000s irrupted, Cuban society was already

³⁶ To mention one graphic example, despite the strong Cuban authorities' ideological positionality concerning this symbol, American flags framed in T-shirts and other clothes are very popular in Cuba. We do not have to assume this kind of depiction of a foreign symbol as an identification with that nation, but it obviously reflects the pervasive presence of those identity aspects of the United States in Cubans everyday lives.

marked by a transnational turn that would increase during the following decade, influencing forms of cultural consumption and interests in the Island³⁷.

By 2015, a community of migrants, that according to estimates approximates 2 million people, sent to Cuba 6.85 billion dollars in remittances (cash and merchandise), more than the combined value of exports of nickel, sugar, tobacco, fresh and frozen seafood, and of tourism sales, amounted to about 5 billion (Morales in Muñoz, 2018: 68). Following the opening of the mobile services and the public wi-fi spots to the traditional and increasing remittances, Cubans abroad added new forms of supporting their families in Cuba. As observed in the wi-fi spots, and corroborated in the interviews, those forms include sending middle and high-range devices to facilitate communications through the wi-fi spots, as well as systematic online recharges both to facilitate the mobile communications and the wi-fi access³⁸. With the increasing communicative flow is logical to assume a more fluid exchange of news and notions about what is happening worldwide. I believe we cannot ignore the influence of the social and cultural remittances to understand the singularities of Cuban communicative ecosystem.

³⁷ The concept of transnational family has become relevant in the context of Cuban migration studies (Aja *et al.*, 2017; Rodríguez & Díaz Varela, 2017). I will come back to its repercussions in everyday lives later in this chapter and in the next chapter.

³⁸ The amount of Cuban migration economic contribution —specifically, the remittances— have not been officially established. Cuban economist Juan Triana calculates around 2-3.5 billion of dollars in remittances per year, which represents, according to him, more than the country's exports (personal interview, 2018). I included two Cuban-American participants in my research. One of them was very emphatic about how much it represents in her everyday economy the commitment to send remittances, and all kind of support to her family in Cuba —including devices and recharges of mobile service and Internet access. However, I could not access any official data concerning this topic, and most of my interviewees showed reticence to admit the impact of those contributions in their everyday lives, or at least they insisted on stating that their family abroad contributes without being ask for it. This is understandable if we consider the impact of narratives that underscore an opportunistic turn in the family relationships. I will come back to this point in the next chapter.

Tamara's testimony illustrates some aspects of Cuban communicative ecosystem involving people on both shores of the Florida Strait. She is a Cuban-American who left the country in the early 2000s. Her mother and grandmother live alone in Havana. Tamara cannot avoid certain resentment concerning the way Cuban authorities organize the access, particularly the prices of all services related to mobile phones and the Internet:

They created these conditions precisely for that reason: to propitiate that Cuban-Americans like me send money to their family here ... to all the persons you need to talk to, in order to achieve a better communication ... for instance, with the video chats. *You must pay for this Internet, because your family can't afford it.* My mother doesn't have enough money to afford the Internet. If she pays for the Internet, how will she pay the food, the electricity, etc. But the fact that we are in the United States doesn't mean that we are ok. We are just working people there. Sometimes we don't have enough money to come and see our family. But with the Internet we can, if they go online, talk to them. "Mum, how are you? Are you feeling ok?" And I can ask her for an advice, I can be closer, at least on the Internet. So, I pay.

Mapping Cuban communicative ecosystem

Cuban communicative ecosystem reflects the convergence of institutional and non-institutional subsystems that combine online and offline alternatives to access information and enable communication needs. Such alternatives involve human agents, tools and media that work within institutional, irregular, and illegal networks. Although these alternatives are currently intertwined, to understand the context of communicative practices in Cuba today is useful to separate those happening mainly within the limits of Cuban institutional communication subsystem, from those taking place in an alternative realm. Finally, we can add the Internet as a relatively new feature where practices of institutional and non-institutional access to information and communication interact, generating a richer experience.

The institutional communication subsystem is a vertical structure led by the Cuban State. It comprises organizations and institutions such as regulatory organs (the Ministry of Communications), providers of services, infrastructures, and networks (the main provider is ETECSA, although there are secondary networks such as Infomed, Cubarte, etc.), and the corpus of regulations concerning the ICTs (several Law-Decrees concerning the networks, the policy of public access, the cybersecurity, among others). Also, it includes the technological infrastructure to support such services (the wired and wireless infrastructures), the human agents participating in any of the stages of the processes (functionaries, personnel in ETECSA's offices, journalists), and the news media (State-regulated and representing the Communist Party ideology and the different levels of local government)³⁹.

The Internet is the space where the institutional subsystem converges with an alternative communicative realm emerged mainly after the 2000s. One of the initial features of this alternative landscape was the 'community of bloggers' that reached more than 2000 blogs, with authors living in Cuba and abroad, and representing diverse perspectives on Cuban reality (Díaz Rodríguez, 2014: 90). During the last decade, the interest has been displaced from the blogosphere to an increasing number of independent

³⁹ New Cuban Constitution elaborates about freedom of speech and the press in its articles 54 and 55. According to article 54, "the State recognizes, respects and guarantees people the freedom of thought, conscience and expression. Conscientious objection cannot be invoked for the purpose of evading compliance with the law or preventing another's compliance or the exercise of their rights." Concerning article 55, it acknowledges the freedom of the press, but it ties the exercise of that right "under the law and the purposes of society." It elaborates: "The fundamental means of social communication, *in any of its manifestations and supports*, are a socialist property of all the people or political, social and mass organizations; and can not be subject to another type of property [cooperative, private?]. The State establishes the principles of organization and functioning for *all means* of social communication." The Italics are mine. With them, I seek to emphasize the extension of control to previously unregulated areas, such as the online environment. A very anticipated Law-Decree that will regulate the communication policies in Cuba is still a work in progress.

media outlets online. The leaders of these media present themselves as an alternative to a stale media system that barely covers the needs of information of the Cuban population⁴⁰. Moving in a non-regulated territory, and in some cases invading the State realm with printed versions that circulate discretely among a cohort of followers, these media are not the only feature of the alternative landscape.

Another group of media and media-associated practices have gained relevance during the last decade, having as core features the “Paquete Semanal” (Weekly Package or the Package)⁴¹ and the neighbourhood networks, known as “La Red” (the Net) or the SNET (in Havana). Also, individual distributors of services of connectivity (the Connectify, in the public wi-fi spots or within the private space), and the apps conceived to provide information and communication alternatives. The apps emulate video-chat platforms and

⁴⁰ Cuban independent journalist and scholar Elaine Díaz Rodríguez starts her article “14 Independent News Sites Changing Cuban Journalism” with the following sentence: “Between 2001 and 2017, 14 media organizations were launched in Cuba that are already making an impact on and off the island.” According to Díaz Rodríguez, founder of one of those media organizations (*Periodismo de Barrio* [Neighborhood Journalism]), “the emergence of [those sites] demonstrates that the national media ecosystem is more complex and diverse than many think. Despite all the limitations they face, the new media ... are innovative and have an impact.” Among the examples of success, she remarks the coverage of issues omitted or under-reported in the official media, a more diversified approach to genres and formats, more innovative ways to distribute contents, alliances with other national and international media, as well as the awards and recognition that their work already granted them (Díaz Rodríguez, 2018).

⁴¹ The package is a weekly compilation that exceeds one terabyte of online information, including news, TV series, films, software, covering different sources available online. It is also a complex system of circulation of information and popular culture that involves the participation of hundreds of people: content suppliers, compilers, messengers, etc. In a personal communication with one of the agents of the weekly package, in 2014, he told me that they reached 80% of Cuban population. Obviously, I cannot affirm the veracity of that number, but the pervasive presence of the package in Cubans everyday lives has been assessed by several media and academic approaches (Ravsberg, 2014; Pertierra in Machado & Rodríguez, 2016; Rodríguez, 2018). Max Barbosa, a professor at the School of Communication in the University of Havana, says that unofficial data refers to around 9 million users (over a total population of near 11 million) (AFP, 2018). The package’s impact is also enhanced by its distribution in businesses dedicated to copying and selling audiovisual contents. Those businesses won legal status after the extension of self-employment in Cuba, following Raúl Castro’s reforms since 2008.

geolocators online in a mixed environment where some functionalities work offline or using the minimum resources of the mobile data service.

The Weekly Package and other offline forms of content circulation

Santiago left Cuba 25 years ago, in the middle of the Special Period. After trying to make a life in Miami and thanks to the new Cuban policies concerning migration, he recovered the rights associated with his citizenship a few years ago⁴². Since then, he has travelled between both shores (Havana and Miami). His testimony exemplifies one of the practices of social and cultural remittances alluded by scholar María Ofelia Rodríguez (personal interview, 2018). “I buy the package. I pay 25 Cuban pesos [one CUC] for one terabyte. There I have all the films, the TV series. I watch them all, in the package. It’s a way to entertain myself *when I’m in Cuba*.” But when he acquires the package, he also covers other people’s demands. “I have a friend. She lives in Miami, and she always asks me to bring her the package. She teaches film and media. She doesn’t have access to Cuban TV series or films. So, before travelling, I always update the package, to bring it to her,” he explains.

During the early 2010s, the weekly package was an urban legend, another one in the very prolific environment of alternative forms of circulating news and cultural contents in Cuba. However, it is not an entirely original idea, neither an exclusively Cuban

⁴² Since 2013, the Cuban migratory process is ruled by a new Law Decree that updated the rules concerning this topic in the Island. In practice, from that date, Cubans keep their residency status as far as they update their migratory status every two years. That policy benefited the circulation of migrants. It has a significant impact on Cubans everyday lives both, on the Island and abroad, because it is a point of departure towards the naturalization of a situation previously tied to political considerations (Cuba, State Council, 2012).

initiative⁴³. According to Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, the managers of this initiative are “capitalizing the evolution of a socially learned practice ... We found researches from the late 1990s and early 2000s that mapped similar systems of circulation of audiovisual contents” (personal interview, 2018). That opinion is consistent with the testimony of one of my interviewees, Armando, a self-employed who had a little printing business in the 1990s and used to print covers for films on CD format. He remembers that “there was a network that distributed films. The films came from enterprises of the State Council. Someone there downloaded it, using the Internet. I remember that people said it was very lucrative. Every original cost 30 USD”⁴⁴. Fidel A. Rodríguez insists that “this kind of processes are natural to all the geographic circumstances where it exists forms of exclusion in the access to goods —media and informative goods in this case” (personal interview, 2018).

The weekly package has been one of the most controversial topics of the current Cuban communicative ecosystem. The main apprehensions concerning this media relate to the cultural hierarchy of its curators and promoters, as well as the violation of copyright. During the last years, Cuban cultural authorities have focused on the first aspect. In a meeting with intellectuals in April 2014, the advisor of the State Council and Council of

⁴³ Indian scholar Ravi Sundaram described a similar landscape concerning pirate practices of content circulation in the Asian country in his article “Recycling modernity: Pirate electronic cultures in India” (1999). Slater (2013) refers to a very similar case of offline distribution of popular culture’s materials in Sri Lanka.

⁴⁴ This testimony reproduces another urban legend: the assumption that those contents come from State enterprises with better access to the Internet. During a presentation at Bowling Green University (Ohio, USA, 2014), I heard a juicy conspiracy theory. According to a professor, the weekly package’s contents, as they are basically reproducing the imperialistic imaginaries and the hegemonic cultural production, could come from the CIA laboratories, seeking to subvert Cuban authorities. I cannot subscribe to any of those theories, because I have not found any person willing to reveal a trustworthy account about it.

Ministers, Abel Prieto, questioned the quality of the contents included in the package. He pointed out that the solution was not to close the package, “because we know what happens when you prohibit something.” According to Prieto, mistakes attributable to educational and cultural institutions, as well as the State media were the reason why the weekly package rose over other initiatives closest to the Revolution’s cultural policies (Redacción Oncuba, 2014).

In an exhaustive report published by *Oncubanews* —an online outlet directed by a Cuban-American entrepreneur— journalist Fernando Ravensberg presented some characteristics of the weekly package. According to Ravensberg, this initiative originated in 2008, and it gets information from several sources, including the University of Computer Sciences, state organizations with good bandwidth access, and even the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (Ravensberg, 2014). Ravensberg referred to the weekly package as “the Cuban YouTube,” a very graphic epithet that alternates in other popular accounts with “the Internet of the poor people” or “the Internet of the disconnected people.”

Despite the apprehensions, other voices went further in trying to define what this initiative means in terms of individual and social agency. Cuban critic Víctor Fowler, during a debate in 2014, pointed out that “when we talk about the package, we are describing two different processes: the alternative circulation of audiovisual contents in Cuba, as well as the way the ICTs’ revolution is impacting our country ... The package reflects desires, alternative networks, subjects with agency and autonomy, consumers, as well as the scarcity of options” (Roque Martínez, 2014).

For some of the participants in my research, the weekly package is another option that adds possibilities to the still recent and too expensive access to the Internet. A young

YouTuber told me that the package makes access to specific contents easier and cheaper. “Not everybody has the facility to go online to see a film or download it. The package gives you updates every week, your favourite TV series, whatever you want to see ... You can use the Internet to access something more specific. I consume both [the Internet and the package] because having the package I save money in the wi-fi.”

Yandro, another YouTuber who launched his career in the package, now alternates his appearances in the package with his posts on YouTube. “People who used to followed me in the package now follow me in my channel,” he says. However, in his opinion, the package still makes a lot of sense in Cuban context: “If you try to watch all you want to watch in the wi-fi, you must go to live behind a bridge, you must leave your house, you will need lots of hours. A TV series’ chapter lasts at least 45 minutes; a film lasts around two hours. You won’t be in a park for two hours watching a movie on your iPhone.”

The neighbourhood networks and the Nano receptors

Yandro also introduced me to a different experience: the neighbourhood networks, especially the SNET, a local network initially designed to connect gamers all around the city of Havana⁴⁵. “I connect my house with another house, and that other guy connects another house, and at the end, there are like ten guys connected in a block. Those guys talk to other guys, and so on,” he explains. After a first moment characterized essentially by

⁴⁵ During a brief holiday in Matanzas, a province located around two hours away from Havana, I could speak with the mother of one young user of this network (also known as the Net). According to her testimony and my observations, the Net is a quite extended experience also in Matanzas. Although the extension of these experiences is not part of the scope of my research, following the tendencies manifested in other kinds of alternative forms of content circulation, I would assume that this is not a Havana-centred phenomenon.

wired connections, there has been an evolution. “Someone started thinking: How to connect someone who lives ten blocks away? Well, you can buy a wi-fi receptor, and the other guy buys another wi-fi receptor, and you communicate with each other.”

According to Cuban scholar Hamlet López, solutions like the weekly package and the SNET are “spontaneous, non-State driven, self-sufficient, iterative, reticulate, distributive, low cost, and flexible, and they are an answer to Cubans scarce connectivity” (in Machado and Rodríguez, 2016). López emphasizes that “the legal status of both initiatives is unclear. These initiatives benefit from a lax regulation concerning the copyright and the intellectual property, but, on the other hand, the Cuban regulatory frame concerning the distribution of telecommunication services does not include non-State agents.” He emphasizes an aspect that cannot be ignored concerning these experiences of alternative networks and media circulation: while these activities exist in a context unclearly regulated, both, the weekly package and the SNET follow internal regulations that exclude political contents or any other information that could be controversial or politically problematic⁴⁶ (in Machado and Rodríguez, 2016: 148-149).

The SNET is an exciting example of the integration of various practices in an enriched communicative assemblage. Several of my interviewees affirm that this network is not just to play games. According to Yandro, he publishes the links to his videos on the SNET, and even though the SNET does not work online, people can always copy and paste

⁴⁶ YouTubers I interviewed stressed their concern with the censorship applied by one of the matrices of the weekly package to Cuban YouTubers. According to my sources, another YouTuber included a video where he stated that in Cuba you could find marihuana (like other drugs, marihuana is prohibited in Cuba, and its consumption and distribution are severely punished). An undetermined authority called the package’s creators and alerted them about that content, and that conversation conducted to the extension of regulations and censorship over Cuban YouTuber’s materials.

on a browser when they go online. It is another promotional option, that adds to the package and Yandro's self-promotion on social networks. Similarly, another interviewee told me that she does not use the SNET, but many of her friends do it to advertise sales or to organize parties, or any other information that they want to share. "It's super fun —she says— because it's *like having the Internet, for those that don't have the real Internet.*"

Although not exclusively, the SNET also relates to the use of wi-fi receptors, a practice very extended nowadays in Cuba. Supposedly, Cuban customs regulates the entry of this kind of equipment in the Island⁴⁷. However, an extended tour of Regla, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Havana, shows that reality is always more creative. Hidden, in some cases, in plain sight in others, the 'Nanos' seem ubiquitous. In less than one kilometre I count five of these receptors. According to my informants, sometimes the owners use the Nanos to participate in non-lucrative experiences like the SNET. In the interviews, I perceived a flexible approach to the Nanos, depending on the use, as an individual non-lucrative good or a mean to get profits. Yandro illustrates that point:

If you want it for a personal reason, I don't think it's illegal. Those receptors capture the signal located five or ten kilometres away. Now, you already have your receptor, and you can play or connect someone else in your house, without having to go to the park. But if you capture the signal, and then you start re-selling that signal, that's not legal in my opinion. Imagine that you gain one CUC per hour [per user]. When you count, you have a bunch of CUCs with a signal that ETECSA is providing, and you only pay one CUC per hour.

⁴⁷ According to the current customs regulations, natural and juridical persons will require authorization to import goods related to telecommunications, such as routers and switchers, wireless telephones operating in specific bands, satellite communication terminals (which includes parabolic antennas and accessories), as well as any equipment destined to the diffusion of data, text or voice using wireless means. However, it does not specify the case of wireless points of access related to the wi-fi technology that —it says— follow a specific normative (Cuba, Ministry of Communications, 2015).

Practices in the public wi-fi spot: the Connectify

Mid-June, 8:30 pm. I arrived at a park located in a residential neighbourhood of Havana. It was becoming dark, and I did not have money in my Nauta account. I needed to buy a card. The only agent of telecommunications⁴⁸ in that zone closed, although a poster on his door states that it opens until 9:00 pm. Another woman was trying to buy a card too. We decided to try again in the park, where groups of people, pretending they are doing something else, re-sell the cards and provide “Connectify service⁴⁹.” If one buys one card, they charge 3.00 CUC. If one buys two cards, they charge 2.50 CUC per each card. In both cases, their prices are a little bit higher than the current price of this kind of card (1.00 CUC per hour). A possible explanation is that they prefer to commercialize the Connectify service, that in the park of this anecdote costs 1.00 CUC per around three hours of access. As we did not want to use the Connectify, we decided to buy two cards. The Connectify providers insisted on charging us 2.50 CUC per each card, but my companion bargained. “We will pay you 2.00 CUC, don’t be mean, chico,” she answered. After achieving our purpose, we took different routes. I installed myself on a bench, in an illuminated area, to test the service and observe the dynamics in the park.

⁴⁸ One of the occupations authorized by the State for the self-employment sector, the agent of telecommunications receives in commission a number of cards and other ETECSA products related to the mobile and the Internet services. It does not include any equipment, neither certain cards —namely, the individual user’s Internet cards that does not require having a Nauta account. This latter, very demanded, only can be acquired on ETECSA’s offices, which creates both, a lack of cards and a black market dedicated to this specific product. According to a recent report, the agents of telecommunications represent 5% of the self-employed sector (Tamayo & Labacena, 2019).

⁴⁹ As I explained in the first chapter, the Connectify hotspots are the result of initiatives that capitalize the access provided by ETECSA in the public wi-fi spots. According to my observations, a possible modus operandi to scape scrutiny could be the acquisition of several Nauta accounts, and the redistribution of service through all those accounts. The relationship between price and hours of access varies and depends on the specific conditions of the hotspots —and the neighbourhoods.

If instead of using a card I decided to access through the Connectify, the routine would be a little bit different. I tried that option several times. The first time, I was having a very poor experience on the Internet. Sit on the bench near me was a young woman. I asked her: “Are you connected? I’m having lots of problems to stay connected.” She looked at my phone, and said: “Have you tried with the Connectify? I always use it. You pay just 1.00 CUC, and you can be here *forever*. It never fails.” She pointed out to a man with a hat on a bench, near ours. While I walked towards him, I wondered: “Does everybody know who he is? Is he worried about it?” I asked him if he could connect me. After scanning me at a glance, he extended his right hand, I gave him my phone, and he configured the hotspot in my phone while talking to another guy. He was visibly upset: “They say we are thieves, but I’m not stealing anything. I pay my 20.00 CUC every day, with my money. I’m not a thief. I don’t steal accounts. All those accounts are mine. I pay for them”⁵⁰. I gave him 1.00 CUC and said thanks. He scanned my face one more time and answered with a gesture barely perceptible.

These anecdotes palely reflect some of the elements that compose the communicative assemblages in the context of public wi-fi spots. Depending on the location, the parks where those spots are, have traditionally been places to share walks or conversations, or playgrounds for kids in the neighbourhood, now enhanced by the new

⁵⁰ My fieldwork coincided with an intense period concerning the Internet in Cuba. ETECSA was proving the Internet in the mobiles, and in several TV informative shows, ETECSA’s directives were discussing practices taking place in the wi-fi spots, mainly, the Connectify. After reviewing the interviews that I collected, I realized that the official discourse affected the interviewees’ perspectives. Except for one interviewee that clearly said she uses the Connectify because it is cheaper than buying the cards, the rest referred this experience the same way it was framed by ETECSA’s directives: as an illegal and hazardous practice. Curiously, at least one interviewee nuanced her arguments adding that “they are trying to live too. Poor guys.”

practices that the habilitation of the Internet access adds to the whole. In one of the parks I observed, someone opened an improvised area of entertainments. Parents bring their children to the park; the adults sit on the benches, and while accessing the Internet they also supervise their kids. It is also an opportunity to show friends and families abroad the children's behaviour in a natural and relaxed context. In days of significant celebrations, anyone can witness interesting examples of transnational communications. Families of both shores gather around a device, mainly a phone. They share jokes, news, advices (“art doesn't pay the rent. I tell you because I know it now,” I overheard an uncle explaining to his niece, while he suggested her pursuing a technical career). As part of the background, a man in a bike with an artisanal refrigerated box offers ice creams. “Ten Cuban pesos” [around 50 USD cents] —he says—. “Baratico” (super cheap).

Zapya and other options “made in Cuba”

In my interview with scholar Rosa Miriam Elizalde she shared the following anecdote with me. “I was teaching this group, at the University. A boy told me: ‘Are you coming with us to Zapya?’ Do you know what Zapya is?” [Elizalde asked me]. I know about an app that helps exchanging files offline. It has been a very popular tool since the early 2010s. In Elizalde's anecdote, Zapya has a slightly different connotation. For these young University students, going to Zapya means going to a park, a place where all of them converge and use that app to play games and exchange messages. When Elizalde asked them, why don't they talk to each other, they answered that it is easier to talk using Zapya, and it is also a good tool to play networked games without consuming the money that they could use later to access the Internet (Elizalde, personal interview, 2018).

Other interviewees referred to several applications providing options to chat without going online. Sometimes Lisandra uses Cuba Messenger when she needs to chat with her aunt in Miami. According to her testimony, she does not pay anything, but her aunt must pay a fee for downloading and keeping the app updated. Other similar apps are Siju and toDus, this latter created in the University of Computer Sciences, and publicized by the media⁵¹. Using the data provided by ETECSA, some of these apps help to minimize expenses and enable alternative ways of communication both, inside the Island, and with other friends and families abroad. The same way Cubans coordinate their communications with their families and friends, establishing routines to expedite the dialogue and avoid unnecessary expenses in the wi-fi spots; they coordinate the use of these apps. Other apps replace, within the Cuban context, features of glocalization services, like the GPS and Google Maps⁵².

In that scenario, I was surprised by ETK, an app that I first heard about thanks to Santiago. After many failed experiences with ETECSA's portal, Santiago downloaded this app that someone recommended to him. I decided to do the same. The ETK integrates all the services provided by ETECSA nowadays, including the Nauta accounts' access and the transference of money. Among its utilities, it offers the users the opportunity to follow their information exchange rate, and once you choose to abandon your account, it will

⁵¹ Official media outlet *Cubadebate* frequently report on toDus' updates. Furthermore, a report by Argentinian media *Clarín* (2018) referred to toDus as 'the Cuban WhatsApp.' A new update of this app was publicized in a note by ETECSA and the University of Computer Sciences (ETECSA, 2019).

⁵² Some examples of this kind of development are restaurants directories (AlaMesa), business geolocators (ConoceCuba), and adjustments of existing apps like Maps.me. Currently, the licences of "programmer of computer machines," under which most of these projects exist today, are limited, supposedly while the agencies in charge of self-employment sector reorganize this specific activity (Tamayo & Labacena, 2019).

immediately disconnect the wi-fi signal, saving battery and money, while avoiding hackers that frequently target Nauta accounts. In my fieldwork, I perceived that people using this app ignore that it is unrelated to ETECSA. Santiago told me that “it has to be part of ETECSA because it works with ETECSA’s data.” Another girl says that she ignores “if it’s private or State-related. I only know that you have everything there, accessible, super easy.”

Elizalde points out that “these developments evidence an understanding, social engineering and, at the same time, an appropriation of state of the art in the informatics, the telecommunications, the mathematical sciences. And all that ensemble is providing a discourse [and the tools, platforms, and media practices] adapted to Cuban reality, but modelled in a way that can be compared with similar developments worldwide” (personal interview, 2018).

Shared Internet accounts

Every day, a woman working in a State job arrives at her office before 8:00 am. She knows that after that hour, due to internal regulations, she will not be able to access Facebook and other social networks. Frequently, a friend will ask her to send a message. She will use her account to deliver the message because her friend —she says— does not have a clue about the Internet. Once she receives the answer, she calls her friend, and that way a very basic line of communication is established. She does not earn any money for this service. However, for years there has been an ample menu of providers of similar services that anyone could find surfing websites designed to promote the purchases or sales of goods and services in Cuba, such as revolico.com (similar to Craigslist).

Valdés and Rivera (1999) describe a landscape of alternative ways of accessing the Internet in Cuba during the late 1990s. They classify these ways under four labels: black market accounts in dollars, surreptitious accounts, account sharing, and distributor account. I will briefly refer to those categories because they are consistent with several narratives about access that I collected during my fieldwork. In the first case, Valdés and Rivera encapsulate a practice “issued using ‘virtual servers’ resident within an approved server either because the system operator(s) allow it, or because they are unaware that the server is stealthily used” (1999: 152) The second case comprises agreements that generally do not involve money payments. “Some of the people running the system set up several extra accounts within the real server and provide prospective users with such accounts as if they were legal users” (ibid.).

These cases could apply to Armando’s experience. He remembers that in the late 1990s someone offered him an Internet account. The provider did not ask for money and only charged him for the modem. That connection did not last, but a few years later, a new provider appeared with an option for a price that Armando considered reasonable. He was starting a private business, and the connection was necessary to get the information concerning his job. Armando and his business associate shared the account. They coordinated the schedule and the Internet time consumption, because they could not access the Internet simultaneously. Before having these options, Armando’s alternative to access information online was in his father’s office. Curiously, according to Armando’s account, his father ignored that he was using Internet access for private purposes because he used to go to the office when his father was not there. However, his father’s boss not only knew it but also allowed Armando’s access.

A third alternative way to access the Internet also documented by Valdés and Rivera is what they call “account sharing.” “This is a situation where someone has a legal account but allows others to use it” (1999: 152-53). This option continues in Cuba today. Ramona, a retired woman whose daughter migrated in the late 1990s, had access to the Internet thanks to her late husband, a foreign citizen resident in Cuba. But once he passed away, she had to find a different option to stay connected. A friend offered her the solution. As a foreign citizen, this friend could have regular access to an account that she shared with Ramona for a monthly fee. As the Nauta Hogar service already arrived at Ramona’s neighbourhood, she has been able to regularize her situation. Now she covers all the expenses and does not make any payments to her friend.

The first case in this section (State employee with access in her workplace) could be an example of what Valdés and Rivera called “distributor account.” Following their description, this case involves “someone with a legitimate account which is used to receive/collect or deliver emails to others” (1999: 153). Although they introduce the notion of “clients,” I believe that this label could apply to those persons that, without the mediation of any financial agreement, provide an indirect but effective service of communication, frequently using the State facilities or legitimate accounts in their houses. However, if someone opened websites like revolico.com during the 2010s, they could find several offers concerning these alternative ways to accessing, receiving and sending information online. Despite the pervasiveness of alternative modalities of paid access, Armando also emphasizes solidarity as a factor benefiting the practices of sharing access and information. During the years of crisis, “we shared a lot of things,” he recalls, and he insists that this is

not just a “Cuban thing” but the consequences of living in any context where some resources become scarce or are banned.

Rosa Miriam Elizalde considers that Cubans “have a huge resilience, a capacity to adjust themselves to difficulties,” and in her opinion, such characteristics will explain “how the Island has lived impressive jumps towards modernity sometimes” (personal interview, 2018)⁵³. Referring to the discreet figures of access in Cuba⁵⁴, Elizalde presents a question that resonates with my research questions: “Can those percentages encapsulate the fact that one person with any access to the Internet becomes a local info-center and socialize the information?” To support her rhetorical question, she adds that because she has had access to the Internet for the last decades, “My daughter’s whole school visited this house to finish an essay or a practical homework.” Likewise, Lisandra completed her undergrad studies thanks to a classmate’s father who provided the information required to complete the assignments, which was only available online. Eliana also helped her two sons to succeed in their studies, using moments of institutional access to get the information for completing their assignments.

Throughout this chapter, I have approached the convergence of the historical aspiration to modernity (as a metaphor of modernization, progress and development) with a sense of connectedness to the global flows of information and communication. I also briefly

⁵³ Elizalde is not talking exclusively about State-driven processes. She acknowledges the creative forces behind communicative actors, tools, and assemblages like those I chose to illustrate Cuban communicative ecosystem.

⁵⁴ For years, the most pessimistic narratives about Cuban Internet access placed the figures among 5 and 25% of Cuban population. More recently, several sources suggested 40% (We are social/Hootsuite, 2018). Cuban National Bureau of Statistic, in an updated approach to this issue, indicates that 533 Cubans (over a thousand) are Internet users (Cuba, ONEI, 2018).

presented Cuban migration not only as an argument supporting communication between families mainly in both shores of the Florida Strait, but also as a promoter of cultural patterns, including imaginaries about the Internet. I have analyzed how the combination of those arguments affects imaginaries about isolation and normality. Finally, I presented some configurations that allows for a general understanding of current Cuban communicative ecosystem. In the next chapter, I will discuss several examples that provide evidence about how individual and social agency has evolved with new ICTs, and how Internet access contributes to the emergence of new communicative practices in Cuba.

Chapter 3

Cuban Agency and the Internet

The narratives collected in my fieldwork tend to confirm the struggles between discourses of pride and shame concerning the place of Cuba in the context of the information and communication technologies. It seems clear for most of the interviewees that Cuban access to and knowledge of the Internet lags far behind most of the nations in the continent and worldwide. But they also raise an alternative discourse based on a unique Cuban way to deal with scarcity in general, that spreads to the domain of the ICTs. The way Cubans adjust tools, networks, practices and levels of agency to create a singular ecosystem in order to fulfill communications, has been addressed by Anna Christina Pertierra (2012) and Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez (2018), among other scholars. But it is also present in everyday discourses.

A young woman in her thirties, trying to explain the emergence in Cuba of alternative ways to access the Internet, points out: “*We normalize processes* [of circumventing the rules and achieving the access] in ways that other people coming from other cultures consider brilliant. For us, in our everyday lives, those processes are just normal, but if you look further, you can see that *there are super creative and crazy paths to get connected*, but also to get to do almost everything” (Dianelis). A man —25 years-old— prefers to be more cautious: “*I don’t know if we have any special skill concerning new technologies*. Maybe it’s just about our needs. You know, when you need something,

you must pursue that thing; you make big efforts, even huge changes in your life [to achieve that purpose]. *When you need something, you always find a way to conquer it*" (Ramón).

Another interviewee refuses the idea of Cubans' exceptionalism: "In the middle of a crisis when you don't have much to share, you share what you have. *It's not about Cubans; it's about any community living in conditions of poverty. I think this kind of practices happens naturally*" (Armando). However, he also suggests some elements that highlight the Cuban context. "It's also true that we have universal access to education, and possibilities to access the higher levels of education without affecting our domestic economies. That generates a sort of mental structure that helps you deal with other information, other capacities, *other kinds of attitudes toward information and knowledge,*" he states.

Scholar Anna Christina Pertierra (2012) sees Cubans' relationship with new technologies, specifically the informal access to and circulation of information and knowledge, as an extension of "the tactics of invention and circumvention that Cuban consumers use in other spheres of everyday life" (401). Indeed, in Cuba "since the 1990s ... the informal has in many ways become the definitive manner in which the problems of everyday life are resolved" (ibid.). Referring to practices of the second or informal economy, Ritter and Henken (2015) offer an interpretation that precedes Cuban revolutionary context. They remark on the fact that irregular practices to access resources were at work even in the colonial period, "provoked both by the isolation and neglect of much of the eastern part of the island, and more directly by the monopolistic mercantilist economic policies of the Spanish crown during much of Cuba's nearly 400-year colonial era (1511-1898)" (2015: 299). Generalizing such tradition to the revolutionary period, and

specifically, the stage opened after the 1990s' crisis, Ritter and Henken underscore the weight of the second economy within Cubans' everyday lives.

If we understand the pervasiveness of the notion of the second economy in all the layers of Cuban society, we can make a suggestive reading of processes of creating and accessing alternative networks and media projects in Cuba, especially during the last two and a half decades, and how they affect the individual and social agency. Adding to the discussion about “normality” and “modernity” that I addressed in the previous chapter, Cuban scholar Fidel A. Rodríguez considers that “there is an imperative to be globally interconnected, to feel part of something else” (personal interview, 2018). Rodríguez believes that such an imperative is even more present in provinces, where the necessity of being current is also related to the need to reinforce local identities. On the other hand, the cosmopolitanism of Havana has favoured “the idea and the culture of accessing goods no matter how” (ibid.). Rodríguez coincides with several participants that “you will always find a way to access the goods, especially when you realize that there are not regular and open ways of accessing them. In those cases, *society* will find a way of constructing and regularizing the access.”

One of the main features of Cuban communicative ecosystem is the construction of alternative media projects or outlets (like the weekly package and the independent online news media). Other features include irregular networks (like the SNET and the Connectify) and the appropriation or development of apps with online and offline functionalities modelled or adjusted to work in the Cuban context (such as Zapyra and several messenger services). Taking into account the tradition of circumventing rules to construct alternative landscapes to achieve communication in Cuba, scholar Anna Christina Pertierra considers

it “hardly surprising that global developments in digital media technologies have allowed Cubans to create a flourishing informal media economy, in which both material technologies and digital contents are exchanged, gifted, rented, and sold” (2012: 403).

The narratives collected for this research offer—in general— abundant evidence of Cubans creativity/knowledgeability concerning the ICTs and the Internet. The necessity to overcome scarcity seems to be the main factor triggering alternative solutions, but the increasing demand for global contents and channels of information is also visible in Cubans everyday lives. Geopolitically isolated, but culturally connected to the global, Cubans’ appropriation of ICTs can be irregular but in general, it mimics experiences worldwide, creating enough conditions to ‘stay current’.

Technological disobedience, resilience or frugal innovation?

Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza coined the concept of “technological disobedience” to define a series of creative day-to-day practices involving objects of everyday life, taking place especially during the 1990s in Cuba. This notion includes the process of accumulation, reparation or re-utilization of obsolete technology in contexts of scarcity, such as the Cuban context. According to Oroza, the “disobedience” lied in the inherent challenge that such practices pose to the current logic of technologic development and consumption of industrial objects. Under that label, this artist encompasses questioning the productive cycle of objects, as defined by the producers; and the users’ interventions on hermetic industrial objects, beyond the limits defined by the producers (Oroza, 2016). Can we discuss the current Cuban communicative ecosystem through the lenses of “technological disobedience”?

I used this concept in my interviews. My purpose was to trigger some reflections regarding practices on the Internet and the process of negotiating the access. Most of the interviewees that discussed the concept rejected it because it carries a political meaning that—in their opinion—does not apply to Cubans relationship with the ICTs. Rosa Miriam Elizalde brought a proverb to explain her opinion concerning the notion of disobedience. According to Elizalde, in the case of Cubans’ approach to ICTs, “people play with the chains, but not with the beast” (*Juega con la cadena pero no con el mono*). By this, she means that those practices of circumventing the rules to get access or modifying the conditions to access, create, and disseminate information are possible as far as they do not contradict other regulations anchored in the political realm⁵⁵.

One of my interviewees, Alejandro, associated with a popular mobile app, also brings some nuances to this discussion: “I believe that we have developed resilience, a capacity to re-invent the way to access those things we need. The disobedience is more related to that necessity than an act of rebellion. We are not that special, as we believe we are. But *because of those needs we have, we learn fast, and we solve our difficulties.*” The way I contacted him is illustrative of Elizalde’s assertion. Once I found his email online, I sent him a message. I also tried to access three other apps’ developers. My interviewee was

⁵⁵ However, during my fieldwork, I perceived a clearer commitment and participation of new media outlets on political discussions on social media. Previously, I frequently noticed that many of the most vocal political activists in Cuban social media landscape resided outside the Island. But, during the summer and especially after December 2018, I perceived increasing participation of activists within the Island, especially on the LGBTQ+ causes and the debates around the new Constitution.

the only one who answered, not without anticipating that he would not discuss any political topics with me⁵⁶.

The same way Alejandro prefers speaking about resilience, rather than disobedience (an opinion also stressed by Elizalde), Pedro Urrea considers the notion of disobedience a myth that does not apply to the relationship of Cubans with ICTs, or with its variations adjusted to Cuban context (personal interview, 2018). According to Urrea, it is more accurate to talk about “la lucha” (the struggle), a concept strongly tied to everyday lives in the Island and to the practices of the second economy also affecting the context of the ICTs. “La lucha” encapsulates all kind of practices of circumventing the rules to accomplishing a goal, always about a perceived or real necessity. Urrea relates “la lucha” to another popular phrase: “taking the left side” (cogiendo por la izquierda), that metaphorically stresses the strategies of taking alternative paths when the “right side,” strongly regulated, impedes the solution of everyday problems.

One of the participants in my research proposed another concept, frugal innovation, that in his opinion is more accurate to approach practices of technological adaptation in contexts of economic constraints. I believe this is a less ambitious concept. Nevertheless, all the concepts that I have briefly referred to express to some extent current experiences of dealing with information and communication in Cuba. Rather than choosing one, I prefer

⁵⁶ I lived a similar experience with one of the agents of the weekly package years ago. I wanted to replicate the contents of an independent magazine I was editing on his package. He told me that someone would check if the contents were right because *they do not publish political contents*. Some of my interviewees have confirmed this kind of anecdotes, as well as media outlets that underscore processes of censorship taking place in some of the versions of the weekly package. One example of this kind of narratives about censorship in the weekly package is the article “Doble censura en la programación del Paquete Semanal” (Double censorship in the weekly package, Periódico Cubano, 2018).

to keep them all in mind when analyzing how Cubans practice their agency concerning the access to information and communication. Technological disobedience, resilience, “la lucha,” and frugal innovation can all explain mechanisms of combining technologies, tools and human capacities to propose alternative networks, such as the SNET. Likewise, they can illuminate the recycling of practices of circulation of information that imply the convergence of regular and irregular networks and agents to create a hybrid scenario that enables and enhance Cubans communicative experiences.

A new scenario: some reflections on the 3G

On January 27, 2019, at 9:11 pm, news flooded my Facebook’s feed: “Strong tornado leaves a great part of Havana in darkness. It looks like a horror film.” Throughout the night, pictures and posts saturated the news section: the tornado hit three working-class municipalities in Havana, one of them is overpopulated. People posted scary images reflecting the dramatic traces the tornado left in the city. We all presumed dozens of casualties and vast material damage⁵⁷. During the following days, a segment of Cuban civil society previously only visible online became visible on the ground⁵⁸. Regardless of

⁵⁷ The official record of victims, when I was finishing this thesis, was seven dead and around 200 injured (Prensa Latina, 2019).

⁵⁸ The concept of civil society has been discussed in Cuba especially after the 1990s (e.g., Acanda González, 1996; Hernández, 2003). While Cuban authorities frame under that category a group of organizations historically committed to Cuban government agenda, others identify civil society with the core of Cuban dissidence. Cuban scholar Isabel Alfonso presents an interesting perspective on the polarizing perspectives concerning Cuban civil society on her documentary *Rethinking Cuban Civil Society*. She states that “According to most sources, Cuban civil society is limited to the opposition, which has little impact on the Cuban political scenario. Regardless, yearly, the U.S. government allocates tens of millions of taxpayers’ money to empower dissidents in the Island. By doing so, it overlooks genuine expressions of pluralism, reform and contestation which are shaping the Cuban public sphere, sometimes in an autonomous way, sometimes within State-run institutions” (Alfonso, 2018). I share Alfonso’s perspective. I believe it offers a more accurate landscape of current Cuban civil society.

political positionalities and isolated —highly amplified— incidents concerning authorities or individual egos, under unifying hashtags like #FuerzaHabana (#StrengthHavana), thousands of volunteers gathered resources to provide support to the victims. While authorities were in shock or evaluating the alternatives, and intermediate functionaries waited for instructions, a massive wave of solidarity —chaotic and ineffective, some argue— spread throughout the affected neighbourhoods, helping the victims to deal with the surviving pieces of their personal belongings.

Soon after the catastrophe, Cuban journalist Sergio Alejandro Gómez published a brief article on his blog under the title “The State loses the monopoly of social assistance in Cuba. For good or for bad?” In his article, Gómez pointed out that “The capacity for organization and impact shown in recent days would have been unthinkable a decade ago,” and he underscores the role of the reforms implemented by Raúl Castro, because they “opened new spaces for private initiative that have changed the landscape to the economic and social fabric of the country for the better” (Gómez, 2019). On his account, the journalist ignores the weight of social media in coordinating and making more effective the solidarity actions after the tornado.

However, the social networks were essential tools mobilizing the efforts towards the recovering. For the first time, thanks to the data access on the cellphones, Cubans tasted what “normal access” to connectivity could mean, and how social networks operate in a more connected environment coordinating and channeling information, opinions and actions towards a goal. In her report as correspondent of Associated Press in Havana, Andrea Rodríguez emphasized that “For the first time in communist Cuba, prosperous individuals and successful entrepreneurs have taken on an important role in disaster

recovery, long a point of pride for a government that boasts of its organizational ability and focus on caring for the neediest.” But she also underscored that “Much of the private effort has been organized on Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media, thanks to the roughly two million Cubans who have signed up for mobile internet since the service became available last year.” And she added: “Cuba is one of the least-connected countries in the world, but that has been changing quickly since the government began providing home and cellphone connections” (Rodríguez, 2019).

A similar narrative has been recently presented by Cuban scholar and journalist Milena Recio (2019). The tornado left behind destruction and loss, but also brought a sense of community that, if we consider the Facebook postings, surprised most of the people involved in the process of collecting and bringing support to the victims, regardless of their political beliefs. Social networks helped coordinating money, goods and supplies gathered both, inside the Island and abroad. Groups on Facebook offered updated information about victims and necessities, contributing to focusing on urgencies and most vulnerable people.

While the weight of young activists was visible online prior to the tornado, during the weeks after the catastrophe other social groups proved to be closest to social networks than expected (the already mentioned self-employed sector). It was also surprising the alliances between institutional and non-institutional and private sectors, which points out to a more heterogeneous civil society than the one depicted by extreme narratives about Cuba. The tornado, and the wave of solidarity that it provoked, also gave the incipient sector of middle-class entrepreneurs the opportunity to prove its commitment to social

welfare and to Cuba as a whole, transcending discourses of individualism and other prejudices that encountered less space than usual in Cuban media during this period⁵⁹.

While the Internet on the mobiles was still an illusion in the summer of 2018, Cubans of different levels of education and social status were enthusiastically engaged in media practices on the wi-fi spots. Some of my interviewees insisted on combining the wi-fi with other options to stay current (mainly, the weekly package and some local versions of WhatsApp), and only a few had the opportunity to use the less widespread offer of Nauta Hogar⁶⁰. In all the cases, even in those that did not identify themselves with sectors eager for information and fluid communication, the access was presented as a natural necessity. While such necessity was clear, their expression of agency in a context of access was less noticeable. However, a self-consciousness concerning how the Internet could work to favour individual agency prevailed —although not exclusively— among the participants aged between 16 and mid-40s, with high level of education, as well as professionals.

⁵⁹ A comment by a notoriously official author on his Facebook profile provoked a wave of rage and disagreement, conducting to an unusual explanation by the author, where he revindicated the role of everybody, including private sector, in the recovering labors (Sánchez, 2019).

⁶⁰ According to a report by official newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, ETECSA currently provides 70,418 Nauta Hogar services. Independent outlet *14 y Medio* interpreted the data as equivalent to 70,418 users (EFE/14ymedio, 2019). However, it is more logical to assume that by services ETECSA means households because although attributed to a nominal user, this service tends to be redistributed throughout the household, benefiting other members of the family. The statistics concerning the Internet access are quite dynamic when speaking of 3G and the wi-fi spots, but according to my observations and the review of unofficial data, the Nauta Hogar's distribution is in an impasse. This impasse probably responds to the prioritization of the 3G, which is more efficient and also offers better recovering rates of the initial inversion. ETECSA's website architecture makes very difficult to keep a trace of the official data. During my fieldwork, I could not access official interviewees in order to have ETECSA's authorities' input, or to give them a voice in my research. I spoke —unofficially— with two functionaries. They informed me that because I was representing a foreign university, I could not get access to someone to interview. Later, I tried to obtain other data or at least the confirmation of unofficial data, but regardless of the politeness shown by my unofficial sources, I never got an answer. For a summary of some of ETECSA's official numbers, see Guevara (2019).

Reviewing agency in Cuban ICTs' context

In this section, I will reflect on the impact of the Internet in the realm of both individual and social agency. First, I will briefly review the academic literature concerning agency in the Internet in Cuba. One of the recurrent arguments relates to the possibilities of enhanced political agency, which has been sustained by Calvo Peña (2010), Henken (2010), Hoffmann (2011), and Duong (2013), among other scholars who write about Cuban bloggers and independent journalists as agents in Cuban civil society. Duong emphasizes that “citizenship can be articulated from a new place of enunciation that challenges the institutionalized forms of cultural and political criticism, charting both the effects of digital media and the role of cultural capital in the formation of political subjects” (2013: 376). Following Castells, Duong states that “horizontal networks of communication counteract the excluding effects of both established media gatekeepers and institutionalized forms of political intervention” (376).

According to those arguments, in a closed context such as Cuba, the enactment of agency should be read in terms of the indirect impact in the public sphere of actions led by individuals with agency⁶¹. That impact has been transparent in several cases recently. For example, social media was widely used supporting the organizers of the Youth Film Festival (Muestra Joven) in a case of censorship against a film included in its 2018

⁶¹ As a strongly State-controlled society, the Cuban public sphere obviously differs from Habermas' concept. Hoffmann has referred to Cuban public sphere —likewise the public sphere under other authoritarian regimes— as “restricted, precarious, incipient, weak” (2011: 6). However, despite those constraints, the public sphere still serves as space of deliberation. Similarly, and building on Silverstone's ideas, Bakardjieva recovers the notion of mediapolis, a “not specialized and demarcated space” that “merges with everyday life and contributes to its common sense, action recipes, things taken for granted and resources for judgment” (2011: 67).

program. Social media was also crucial during the campaign and counter-campaign concerning the inclusion/exclusion of equal marriage in the draft of new Cuban Constitution, and the mobilization after the tornado⁶². However, one of the failures of the most optimistic narratives about those processes of infiltration of Cuban public sphere by an alternative public sphere that exists mainly online has been to ignore that, as predicted by Castells, ‘informed people’ has frequently been the only followers of these new forms of participation and citizenship. Another possible criticism is to limit the notion of agency to politically-driven projects.

In his approach to media cultures and practices, Nick Couldry (2012) discusses the myths associating new communication technologies with democratization and the achievement of “political harmony.” As he states, “The Internet creates new possibilities for non-formal political actors to form and build communities of practice online, challenging the boundaries of national politics”, but in order to produce changes in the distribution of political authority, political actors should establish alliances across the divides of gender, age, ethnicity and class (2012: 120; 123-24). Couldry echoes Castells, who alerted us about the possibility of replicating *a new Athenian democracy* within the Internet. According to Castells, “while a relatively small, educated, and affluent elite in a few countries and cities would have access to an extraordinary tool of information and

⁶² In the three cases, critical thinking about authorities’ behaviours and decisions have found space within the social media. Even before the 3G, Cuban cultural authorities felt compelled to respond to the wave of solidarity raised by the Muestra Joven. Likewise, the independent character of acts of solidarity related to the tornado finds a correlative narrative in the official discourse that tends to emphasize the role of institutions. The campaign of official Cenesex (an institution that advocate for LGBTQI+’s rights) focusing on the necessity of an affirmative vote supporting the new Constitution, can be read —at least to some extent— as a reaction to the strong positionality of many activists against the new Constitution after the elimination of article 68, that clearly favoured equal marriage.

political participation, actually enhancing citizenship, the uneducated, switched off masses of the world, and of the country, would remain excluded from the new democratic core, as were slaves and barbarians at the onset of democracy in classical Greece” (in Warf, 2013: 21).

This kind of analysis brings us to the concept of the digital divide, coined to express the inequalities in the access. Today, this concept has evolved, considering the pervasiveness of the Internet in everyday lives, even in cases like Cuba. Warf considers the divide as a “multi-dimensional phenomenon that reflects the diverse channels through which social inequalities are re-inscribed in cyberspace” (2013: 19). Appadurai (1996) defines five dimensions of the global cultural flows that he considers as interconnected landscapes: ethnoscapas (“the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live”), technoscapas (the global configuration of technology), financescapas (the distribution of global capital), mediascapas (“accounts of strips of reality”), and ideoscapas (concerning the terrain of ideologies). According to Appadurai, the way those landscapes interact frequently result in disjunctive orders that affect the uneven distribution of modernization worldwide (33).

Evolving from the concept of the digital divide, the notion of digital differentiation seems very productive to explain how the disjunctive orders described by Appadurai manifests in Cuban context: the evolution of user’s histories, practices and experiences; their agency and notions of empowerment through more active civic participation online. As stated by Ragnedda (2017) and Warf (2013), digital differentiation is affected by class, age, gender, and the local and global geographies of the Internet, as well as other factors, such as the educational level, personal beliefs, and other cultural formations. These

intermediations suggest another way to approach digital differentiation, one that contemplates the impact of such differentiation in knowledge⁶³ and emphasizes the uneven relationship between knowledge and space across multiple scales (Ragnedda, 2017: 12).

Digital differentiation is a key element to understand the evolution of forms of differentiated agency in the Cuban context, and to consider how Cubans appropriate the variety of existing alternatives to establish and maintain channels of information and communication. As Van Dijk states, “most inequalities of access to digital technology are of a more relative kind ... some people are earlier or faster than others in accessing new technologies; ... some people possess more hardware, software, and skills than others; ... one group uses the technology more or in different ways than another” (in Ragnedda, 2017: 18). The historical delay in accessing the Internet has affected the way some of the participants in my research enact their agency online. As the discussion of several cases will prove, we can trace the ways digital differentiation conducts to differentiated ways to express agency in Cuban new connected context.

The cases

The way the participants in my research express their agency concerning the Internet passes through different layers. We can encapsulate those layers within the analysis of digital differentiation. First, mixed strategies including regular or irregular networks and media intertwine in the process of negotiating the access. This kind of process is significantly tied to practices that the participants consider productive in their everyday

⁶³ Crampton describes “three senses of knowledge: to know with (access to tools), to know what (access to information), and to know how (how to use the tools)” (in Ragnedda, 2017: 12).

lives (having access to information for professional development, downloading or updating online outlets, coordinating their private businesses online, communicating and coordinating family strategies, among others). According to my data, the irregular practices are more common among the youth (considering a broad range between 16 and 45 years old)⁶⁴. However, some cases interrupt this kind of narrative. Alina (retired, 50 years-old), whose daughter lives in Europe, admits that she uses whatever she needs to guarantee her access every day. Sometimes she buys the cards (regular access); sometimes, she pays an agent to recharge her Nauta account (regular access/service provided by a self-employed); and sometimes she approaches a Connectify provider (irregular access). She will choose the simplest/cheapest way to achieve access because the opportunity of communicating with her daughter every day is “vital” for her.

Likewise, not all young users will approach the Connectify providers or other irregular options. For Karen (a University student, 22 years-old), accessing the Internet through a Connectify provider is pure craziness: “They don’t necessarily have the adequate knowledge to manage the service they offer. They download a program and work with it the same way anyone can do it. So, who guarantees the security?” And she adds that she mistrusts a service that implies accessing the Internet throughout an unknown server. She wonders who manages that server and about the destiny of her data and passwords on those servers. Those considerations discourage her from using the irregular networks⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ Only a few of my interviewees (eight) admitted at least one irregular practice or strategy to access the Internet. In general, they range that age (between 16 and 45). I will discuss some exceptions below.

⁶⁵ Which is quite ironic, on the other hand, if we consider that the monopolization of the institutional networks somehow guarantees the retention and control of data. In short, we do not know how ETECSA uses our data, but we have experienced leaks of our private data (including our personal addresses) several times.

Another layer of agency concerns the understanding of the possibilities that the Internet opens in terms of information and knowledge. This layer reflects both, the weight of pre-existing imaginaries, and the confirmation of positive or negative experiences concerning communicative practices online. Although some experts (García Salas, personal interview, 2018; Fowler, personal interview, 2018) and participants in my research are concerned about an acritical appropriation of the Internet by Cubans, this kind of experience is not necessarily the rule. In my interviewees, I found more reservations than conformity when asked about the Internet as a source of valid information or universal knowledge. Surprisingly, these kinds of concerns were not limited to the most knowledgeable users (young university students and professionals), which reinforces the pertinence of evolving to a discussion on agency through the lenses of digital differentiation.

Probably, one of the most illustrative examples is Ramon's testimony (25 years-old). An urban musician who uses his networks to promote his work, when Ramon was a teenager he heard about the Internet as something that people with more opportunities than he has could access⁶⁶. He believed that he could find online practically anything he needed to know. His first attempts to access the Internet included going to spaces near a hotel, capturing the signal (he does not clarify if he used irregular alternatives, but according to the dates—early 2010s—, that option seems the most probable), and redistributing an hour of access among 10 to 12 friends. He refers to an experience similar to the current

⁶⁶ Ramon's testimony was the only one that clearly stated class differences during my fieldwork. His perception about who could access the Internet in Cuba during the early 2000s implies judgments directly related to race (primarily white people) and social position (authorities or their families).

Connectify hotspots. According to Ramon, “having that ‘thing’ [a piece of software] was like finding gold.”

Ramon’s perspective has evolved towards a more productive but also more critical insight into the resources available online. He has already tested several times the veracity of the information found on the Internet, and also has some concerns about the changes that Internet practices could introduce in Cubans’ identity, including increasing social isolation. He explains:

Before, you went on a bus, and you were listening to others’ conversations. Maybe they weren’t interesting, but maybe there was this person who didn’t have many economic possibilities and didn’t have a car, but he knew interesting things that you care about, and you learned by listening to this person ... My pal and I go by the streets watching our screens, listening to our playlists. Before, we used to talk. With the Internet, you stop talking to each other.

Several interviewees told me stories about negative experiences, and how they learned — through those experiences— to be more careful when posting in social networks or accepting new virtual friends. Jaime, a university student, shared a story that happened when he was a teenager. Then, his only contact with the networks was the Cuban intranet. Even though the intranet is very curated and presumably secure, he suffered harassment when a pedophile infiltrated a forum frequented by teenagers. Joel, who is currently studying Informatics in a Technological School (similar to College), accepted a beautiful girl as a Facebook friend. “She” happened to be a pedophile. Once he discovered the lie, he learned that he cannot accept any person whose profile does not look convincing: “How is it possible that an amazingly beautiful girl has only ten friends on Facebook?” —He laughed while he shared the story. Some of the women I interviewed referred to similar stories of harassment, and how they learned to be more cautious online.

Only a few interviewees considered that the State has a responsibility for creating the knowledge that minimizes risks online. However, for the majority of participants, it is a personal responsibility to learn how to manage social networks and to be aware that the Internet can also be a space for dangerous practices, and anyone can be a victim of them.

Agency at large

One of the most surprising features of the Cuban communicative ecosystem is the systematic emergence of online periodical outlets. Regardless of their editorial line, the online outlets always have a political meaning in Cuba⁶⁷. Such projects started mainly within the last five years, before the extension of Internet services on the Island. Their emergence also reveals that many online practices in Cuba have become central to people's way of life.

Around five years ago, Johan decided to create a magazine. He wanted to read the news that he could not find in Cuban press: stories that could relate to people of his age (he was in the mid-twenties). Although the idea was to publish the magazine in a pdf format within the weekly package⁶⁸, Johan and his partners always dreamt with being fully online,

⁶⁷ Cuban official policy concerning media has always restricted the property of media to social or political organizations, wholly aligned to Cuban government (on the previous Constitution, article 53, which continuity is already expressed in the new Constitution, article 55). Although the Internet opens new possibilities to contest the legal frame because it allows for more autonomy, in the day-to-day practice many of these online outlets work in a grey zone that puts them in a very vulnerable position. Some of these journalists have documented harassment while trying to do what they consider their responsibility. An example is the article “¿Quiénes tienen derecho a contar un país?” (an approximate translation could be “Who has the right to tell the stories of a country?”), editorial text published by *Periodismo de Barrio* after the detention of eight journalists, including six members of its staff, while they were trying to cover the consequences of hurricane Matthew, that impacted the eastern territory of Baracoa, Cuba, on October 2016 (Periodismo de Barrio, 2016).

⁶⁸ The economy of the weekly package has been discussed by Ravensberg (2014), however, despite this work, several aspects remain unknown, which is coherent with the package's legal status. In cases like Johan, I cannot assure that any transaction guarantees the inclusion on the package. However, some of the YouTubers

and they have worked consistently to create the adequate conditions to escalate their project using the Internet. Johan remembers the first time they upload the website with a mix of nostalgia and pride. “We went to a hotel, near the designer’s house. One of us had a friend at the hotel’s desk. So, he was responsible for buying the card⁶⁹. We sat on a stair, in front of the hotel, where we could capture ETECSA’s signal. And we connected there.” He remembers updating the magazine in the rain, one of them holding an umbrella mostly to protect the laptop, rather than to protect themselves.

Johan’s agency concerning access has evolved together with his magazine and the extension of the wi-fi spots. For a period, he and his team worked in a private house. To access the Internet, a resource that was already essential to guarantee the magazine’s existence, they installed a Nanoantenna that captured the signal of the nearest wi-fi spot. More recently, they rented an office and with the right to rent an office also came the right to legally accessing the Internet service. But, for Johan, the limitations not only reside in Cuban rules. Having as his primary device an iPhone, he has collided with a United States prohibition. Apple Store does not allow downloading software updates from a Cuban IP. So, he circumvents that rule using a VPN that allows him to keep his device ready to work⁷⁰. For Johan, accessing the Internet, no matter how, was initially a cool adventure, but very soon it became an essential part of his life. His project exists on the Internet.

that I interviewed referred stories of paying around 10 CUC per month in order to include a fixed number of megabytes. They also pointed out that this kind of transaction not necessarily guarantee the inclusion in the final product. First, because it exists more than one matrix, and second, because the matrices pass by several hands and, as it is an open product, it can be affected by decisions between the initial stages of its production and the final client.

⁶⁹ As Johan recalls it, at that time, the Internet cards cost around 5-6 CUC per hour. Cubans were not supposed to buy cards on the hotels, but it was easier to find cards there than in the ETECSA’s commercial offices.

⁷⁰ Other interviewees have described this kind of problems concerning the iPhone updates, and in all the cases the solution has been the same: using a VPN. The VPN is also a good tool, together with the proxies,

Johan's case is not isolated. On the contrary, the ways he manages to guarantee stable and cheaper access to the Internet is shared by other entrepreneurs in Cuba, like Armando. In 2001, the Internet became essential to guarantee Armando's main source of incomes. He has consciously designed his relationship with the Internet to use its resources "productively." After several years of being a self-employed, Armando has established a relatively strong apartment rental business. When he realized that the Nanoantennas were a common feature of urban landscapes in Cuba, he decided to pay 350 CUC (there are cheaper options, but he could not find any), and offer the access at home as an added value to the renting business.

Even more surprising is the emergence of "a community" of Cuban vloggers. Samantha is one of them. When I asked her why she is participating in an experience so difficult to accomplish in a country where the connectivity is still so precarious, she amazed me: "I want to be recognized, not only in Cuba but in the world." Couldry (2012) has described the necessity of being present online as one of the needs explaining media practices in a context where connectivity is the norm and not the exception. What does this imply concerning Cuba? Samantha's testimony provides some clues that point out to other needs. Markedly, she stresses the necessity to overcome the isolation and the aspiration to do what she assumes everybody at her age does. I believe that these needs implicitly

to circumvent authorities' regulation concerning the access to specific websites which political content is deemed as dangerous and therefore censored by Cuban authorities. However, the VPN does not provide the best solution for Cuban YouTubers, still waiting for a possibility to monetize their channels, an option also vetoed by the U.S. financial regulations. I base my analysis on my interviewees' opinions, as well as my own practice in Cuba, and the experiences of some of my colleagues that freely share these anecdotes online.

connect with the notions about modernity, modernization, development and normality analyzed in the previous chapter.

The “normal” Cuban user

Eliana goes online only to talk to her son. She insists on that point, although she immediately adds how much she enjoys her social networks, to the point that her best experience on the Internet is finding dozens of greetings when her birthday approaches. Few days after our first interview, she let me know that she wanted to share a new anecdote with me. Her son called her on a Saturday morning because he wanted to show her his sons playing in a park. She was still sleeping, and extremely tired. She decided to defer the conversation to their regular schedule, that afternoon. For her, that was an awful experience that demonstrated how unfair it is when you do not have the Internet at home. I asked her, what would she do before the wi-fi spots if her son called her. She answered without any doubt: she would receive that call. “Last Saturday you made your choice,” I told her. After a moment of hesitation, she concluded: “You are right. I haven’t seen it that way.”

Likewise, for Arianne, the Internet is that space where she goes every week to talk to her son. She barely uses her social networks. However, a few minutes after making that argument she remembers that more recently she has been using her Facebook profile to post the pictures she takes. She has recently discovered, after being retired for a while, that she has a good eye for photography. She even won a local award with one of her pictures, and she feels very stimulated with her new hobby. The Internet is a frame to exhibit her work, a gallery that she can control. She does not depend on established institutions to present her pictures, and that gives her a sense of satisfaction.

Neither Eliana nor Arianne had ever conceived of those experiences as new forms of exercising agency. In Arianne's case, someone previously deprived (or at least that was her initial self-perception) of any agency online became her manager and gained the ability to present and promote her artistic work. In Eliana's case, suddenly a communication that has been ruled by one side is negotiated and ultimately achieved with the concurrence of both sides of the transnational family.

According to local ethnographic researches (Rodríguez & Díaz Varela, 2017), with the changes in Cuban migratory policy the decision to migrate frequently results from a family consensus. This consensus implies certain agreements in the distribution of responsibilities between those who migrate (mainly, young people) and those who stay in Cuba (mainly their parents). The decision of migrate does not imply a rupture but a reorganization of family dynamics, consistently with the logic of the transnational family. This change of dynamics affects communication.

In the wi-fi spots it is common to observe a more balanced distribution of agency among Internet users. According to my observations, Cuban parents provide advice and emotional support to their young family members abroad. Likewise, these latter have more control about the way their parents and other family manage the material support they sent. Both sides have choices, a voice, and are accountable. I overheard a conversation between a woman in her fifties (in Cuba) and someone presumably younger on the other end. It was basically an account of how the first managed to distribute money throughout the family, without letting one of the members of the family know who was providing that support, which opens the door to interesting questions beyond the scope of my research. Another conversation between two friends on both shores presented the one on the Island

advocating for her friend on the other side: “You have been more than supporting with her, and you know that. Don’t let them make you feel bad about it. Focus on making the best way to solve your own problems.”

There are abundant popular narratives that reduce the role of Cubans living abroad to suppliers of resources —money, goods, cellphones and other devices— while their families in Cuba are just waiting for those resources. I cannot provide any conclusion neither it is the goal of my research⁷¹. However, concerning how the individual agency manifests throughout the Internet, I believe that in terms of communication the Internet is balancing a relationship that until very recently placed all the agency to start a communication outside the Island. For Cubans living in the Island, the only alternative was frequently to wait for a phone call. At the same time, I believe that prior to the extension of access, the nature of communicative experiences limited the accountability concerning family strategies. The prioritization of more emotional communications due to the cost of phone calls restricted the ways that Cuban migration could assess how their contribution was impacting their family’s day-to-day.

⁷¹ Concerning Cuban transnational family there is a widespread narrative that presents the extension of practices that imply more opportunistic relationships between families in both shores. This narrative reflects in Cuban popular culture, as demonstrated by the YouTube series of *Yesapín García* (2018) and the theatrical show “Hasta que la wifi nos separe” (Until the wi-fi separates us). The first includes among its topics the difficulties of keeping communication between both shores (one side in Havana and the other in Miami). “Hasta que la wifi...” is a show that compiles some of the imaginaries, tendencies, and practices on the wi-fi spots, including the habit of continually asking for money and goods to family and friends abroad. Both, the audiovisual and the show criticize, always in a comedy tone, the deformation of family ties under this kind of practices. However, scholar María Ofelia Rodríguez invites to see other aspects of this phenomena and suggests that in many cases that kind of practices is the result of internal agreements that have been established as part of the conditions of migration. According to recent studies, the youth is the most significant component of Cuban migration (Aja *et al.*, 2017). Rodríguez implies that in exchange for accepting the youth migration, it was assumed by all parts systematic support to their families’ economies in the Island. On the other hand, my interviewees reject the kind of practice (even the narratives) that reduces their family relationships to the provision of money or material goods.

Partial conclusions

While the National Assembly discarded the revolutionary article 68 that emphasized the right to equal marriage in the new Constitution at the end of 2018, a New Year spot was broadcasted on National television (*Spot de Fin de Año*, 2018). This government ad emphasized diversity, depicting for example, a lesbian couple expecting a child and a father responsibly assuming his paternity. But it also illustrated the extension—either in the imaginaries or in everyday lives—of new media practices in Cuba today. A young girl checking her social networks distributed “likes” and “loves” to her friends’ posts.

This kind of narrative is not new. Long before the Internet became a more available resource in Cuba, the presence of an imagined Internet was already visible in everyday lives. Such imaginaries have been frequently presented and emphasized by Cuban cultural production. For example, before the 3G, a theatrical show used the language of emoticons on big screens as a way to remark the transition from one scene to the following. Likewise, the performers appeared on stage wearing T-shirts and hats where different hashtags pointed out the main topics that the show would discuss. In its last version (summer 2018), the show’s preface—always designed to present current news in a comedy style—accentuated the fact that now Cubans can discuss their Constitution on social media⁷². This example—and many others from the domain of cultural production—, as well as the constant reference to websites in official Cuban broadcasting even before the opening of wi-fi access, summarize a tendency where the discourse about the Internet and specifically

⁷² I am referring to the theatrical show “CCTV,” by the Cuban group El Portazo, which second season was presented while I was doing my fieldwork in Havana.

social media anticipated the implementation or extension of such opportunity in the Cuban context. This anticipation, I believe, contributes to anchoring Cubans' imaginaries about the Internet, and the possibilities the Internet offers as a new space of individual expression and channeling the agency.

In this chapter, I have approached some experiences of Internet practices and how they reflect new forms of individual agency already emerging in Cuba. Those forms express evolution in a context where circumventing rules has become "the normal." They tend to normalize Cubans' status compared to other contexts where the Internet has been a standard feature of globalization. As one of my interviewees told me, "at some point, the Internet had to arrive here, as *a normal thing*." "*In an idealized Cuba, with full access, the thing would be easier. Now, with this limited connectivity, we develop our opportunities,*" said Samantha, and for an activist, "Cuban mentality must change after *experiencing the ocean*." Although for the most part unconsciously, these forms of appropriation of the Internet experience are becoming natural.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

In a recent article by *ICT Discoveries*, a journal of the International Communication Union, a group of scholars proposed to approach Internet practices today from the perspective of “alternative Internet models.” Vigil-Hayes *et al.* dispute the binarism that frequently affects the debates on the Internet (access/no-access, high/low-speed, ubiquitous/no-ubiquitous access, etc.). The authors aim to reflect on what they classified as “crafted hybrid Internet models that achieve many of the benefits of ubiquitous connectivity, while simultaneously reducing exposure to the more damaging aspects” (2018: n.p.), such as the surveillance/tracking culture experienced in communities with affordable, ubiquitous and high-speed access.

Among the case studies chosen to demonstrate the relevance of the alternative Internet models, the scholars included three Cuban modalities of accessing and circulating information: The Weekly Package, the apps designed to work in a hybrid online/offline context, and the public wi-fi hotspots. In their analysis, they implicitly underscore the level of individual and collective agency that drives some of these projects. For instance, they emphasize that the Weekly Package “facilitates community-oriented content curation — providing a context wherein content interaction is not seen as a purely individualistic endeavour, but a community collaborative effort for identifying that which is most relevant and most important” (2018: n.p.).

Virgil-Hayes *et al.*'s reflections do not focus on other relevant aspects of those models, such as the economic frame that makes them possible, the consumption practices

they encourage, and the piracy culture embedded within some of them. They do acknowledge that, in the Cuban case, the emergence of “alternative Internet models” is more the result of a necessity than a challenge to or a revolt against current global flows of information. In other words, while Cuban people and several scholars proudly exhibit these initiatives as valuable examples of the agency concerning the ICTs, they also acknowledge that when Cubans choose alternative ways of accessing information and communication, they are not necessarily renouncing to the aspiration to achieving the kind of access experienced worldwide and interpreted by Cubans as “the normal.”

In this thesis, I have discussed narratives about the Internet experiences in Cuba from two interconnected perspectives. First, I analyzed the relevance of a sense of connectedness to the global flows of information and knowledge rooted within Cubans’ identity and second, the influence that increasing Internet access has on more evolved notions of individual and social agency, enhancing Cubans’ perspectives about the ICTs.

I looked beyond the pragmatic arguments that justify Cubans’ constant pursuit of accessing communication and information (mainly, the increasing trans-nationalization of Cuban family). Within the narratives I collected I analyzed the recurrence of a sense of belonging to the world intermingling with notions about modernity (equated in these narratives to modernization, technological progress and development), insularity and normality. To understand how the communicative assemblages described in my thesis inform the most exciting features of Cuban communicative ecosystem, it is also important to consider Cubans’ high level of education (emphasized by the interviewees). Likewise, individual and socio-historic interpretations about technological obsolescence and disobedience (Oroza, 2016), as well as a ‘culture of resilience’ learned throughout decades

of circumventing scarcity also reflected on a very established culture of the “second economy” (Ritter and Henken, 2015) that affects all the layers of Cuban society.

As pointed out by academics during the last decade (Pertierra, 2012; Rodríguez, 2018, among others) these features are not necessarily new neither exclusively Cuban. In the Cuban case, they are contingent on the status of limited connectivity and, in some cases, enduring solutions that allow Cubans to cover a necessity that transcends basic communication needs. I proposed to enhance the scope of analysis to the persistence of cultural beliefs deeply rooted in the nation’s identity formation. Those beliefs reflect an aspiration to overcome geopolitical isolation and access normality, a status frequently located (or imagined) elsewhere, and associated in the discourses with notions about modernity, technological progress and development.

As Pérez Jr. points out, the adoption of modern patterns coming from the United States brought Cuba “the appearance of normality at the start of the twentieth century” (1999: 157). Rather than disappearing after the dramatic disruption of the Cuban revolution, “the vanity of modernity” continues to be an aspiration. As Cuban scholar Fidel A. Rodríguez says, “Cuba has never conceived itself disconnected from international cultural flows” (personal interview, 2018). That sense of connectedness adds deep layers to the understanding of initiatives to access and circulate information, communication, and knowledge that have frequently been analyzed from an operative perspective based on understanding how they work. I added to that perspective the idea that Cubans’ sense of connectedness is deeply embedded in everyday narratives about the Internet, together with the imaginaries of an ideally connected Island, and growing expectations about access. Based on my data, my empirical knowledge, and the literature I reviewed, I believe that

sense of connectedness offers a plausible —although not unique— path to approach the “why” behind everyday negotiation of information, communication, and knowledge in Cuba.

As these cases demonstrate, individual and collective agency is rapidly evolving thanks to increasing Internet access. The digital differentiation is a valuable concept to approach notions of the agency concerning the Internet today in the Island. Most of the elderly I interviewed expressed that the new opportunities promised by the Internet seem to be more relevant for young people⁷³. Likewise, users having a higher level of education, and professionals working in fields somehow related to the ICTs demonstrate a more critical approach to the Internet than less educated or no-professional interviewees. But in general, the participants question the security of access and practices online, the quality of the information on the Internet, and in one case, the impact that such practices will have in Cubans’ identity. Other elements such as social class, gender and race should be tested in further approaches to this subject.

One of the challenges of studying Cuban communicative ecosystem is the dynamism that the arrival of the public access has added to all the elements of the ecosystem. When I started this research, the public wi-fi hotspots were new. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2018, I did not perceive the wi-fi hotspots as the main feature. At that point, what was most visibly pervasive were irregular practices such as the Nanoantenna and other neighbourhood alternative networks. ETECSA even started a campaign destined to discourage the use of irregular networks (especially the Connectify

⁷³ One of my eldest interviewees told me that “an old man with the Internet is like a monkey with a grenade.” And he is not the only one perceiving it that way.

hotspots). On December 2018, ETECSA began to provide 3G mobile access and recently, the company launched the 4G data service, although restricted to specific consumers (those who pay more, for packages of 2.5 GB-4 GB). The decision attempts to minimize the impact of 3G traffic on mobile networks collapsing due to the increasing popularity of the mobile Internet⁷⁴. The introduction of this alternative, rather than reducing the digital differentiation, adds a new layer to this phenomenon. To access this new option, the users should have a device that supports the newest technology —FDD LTE on the 1800 MHz (ETECSA_Cuba, 2019). Also, only 5% of current users buy 2.5 GB (Figueredo & Álvarez Guerrero, 2019). These elements suggest the pertinence of in-depth analysis that considers the variable class⁷⁵. However, it is also possible that this new alternative encourages those persons cautiously using the ‘cheaper package’ based on the inefficiency of the service to jump towards a more ‘normal’ experience of access.

When they announced the 4G service, ETECSA’s functionaries blamed users of buying the data packages with devices that support the 3G on the 900 MHz and subsequently using devices that only support 2G to navigate. Supposedly, this procedure affects the quality of the service and the traffic (Figueredo & Álvarez Guerrero, 2019)⁷⁶. Other reports demonstrate the subsistence of alternative practices to save mobile data,

⁷⁴ Some reports emphasized that around 5000 new users were trying the 3G access every day (Figueredo & Álvarez Guerrero, 2019).

⁷⁵ During my observations and in the interviews the variable class did not emerge as a relevant factor concerning agency. Interviewees self-identified as lower-class demonstrate both initiatives to negotiate access, and critical thinking concerning the Internet. However, this singularity within the context of a research limited in scope cannot be generalized.

⁷⁶ I capture an image of an announcement in porlalive.com (a website similar to Craigslist), where someone offered configuring the access to the data packages within devices that do not have the 3G on the 900 MHz, which evidences, again, the survival of Cubans’ instincts to circumvent the rules.

notably the promotion of most efficient hybrid online/offline messenger platform⁷⁷. Near two million Cubans tested the 3G until January 2018. If we consider other alternatives of accessing the Internet (access in the workplaces, public wi-fi hotspots, access in the households, Internet cafes, shared accounts, etc.), we can subscribe, at least theoretically, a significant increase in the number of frequent users of connectivity services in the Island. But, at the same time, the survival of old practices —or what Virgil-Hayes *et al.* call alternative Internet models— points to a context where scarcity persists, alongside local solutions to overcome scarcity. Although the Internet adds new features to the Cuban communicative ecosystem, it is utopian to infer that it will replace old agents, networks and practices any time soon.

Remaining questions

The Cuban communicative ecosystem faces new challenges today, with the approval of a Constitution that ratifies the State control over the media. However, during the late stage of my thesis, I took notes on the launching of at least two new online outlets⁷⁸. During the last years, social networks have been somehow naturalized as the space to present alternative views in Cuban society. But, the news media option —even the online

⁷⁷ According to a news report, ETECSA considers toDus —the messenger platform created at the University of Computer Sciences— more economic than any other foreign platform, although some users were complaining because the “Cuban WhatsApp” took money directly of the international packages (Redacción IPS, 2019). On the other hand, the report emphasized that the real WhatsApp continues to be very efficient replacing the traditional means to make phone calls and send messages from Cuba.

⁷⁸ The first, Proyecto Inventario (Inventory Project), presents itself as a platform to collect and publish data that generally is not public in Cuba, incentivizing a culture of accountability. Although coherent with the main authorities’ political discourse about digital governance and citizens’ participation, Inventario is an independent media project located in a zone that the Cuban Constitution excludes. A second project, Alas Tensas, is the online magazine of a group that has been promoting feminist causes on social networks during the last few years.

alternative— becomes a challenge in Cuban context, and it could be read as a deliberate attempt to continue taking “by force” spaces mostly deny to this kind of projects.

According to my observations on social networks, the normalization of alternative communication projects was perceived at some point as a possible outcome of the new Constitution. However, the new scenario suggests other paths to explore further how do policies concerning information and communication in Cuba intertwine other aspects of reality, mainly national identity, security and political identities? How do public and political discourses set the new policies concerning information and communication in Cuba? To what extent do they interpret (or not) notions about digital governance and social participation framed within the program of the Cuban government and society until 2030? Furthermore, to what extent does the mobile Internet access normalize Cubans relationships with the ICTs?

While closing this thesis, the news about a deal between the technological giant Google and Cuban ETECSA to provide the Island with a high standard of connectivity, flooded the web (ETECSA, 2019; The Associated Press, 2019)⁷⁹. With a potentially more democratic and pervasive presence of the Internet in Cubans everyday lives, can we envisage a context where the levels of social agency visible on Cuban social networks today will produce more effective practices of citizenship, or at least the naturalization of media practices beyond Cuban mythic exceptionality, to become “like everybody else”?

⁷⁹ A more cautious note, by *The Miami Herald* (Gámez, 2019) emphasizes the lack of clarity in the terms of the official note reproduced by ETECSA (2019, March 28). According to this report, the Memorandum of Understanding must be interpreted as a very initial step towards negotiation that, eventually could conduct to better conditions of access in Cuba. At the same time, the report remarks that Cuban authorities are signing similar agreements, focusing on cybersecurity, with allied nations, such as Russia.

Bibliography

- Abd'Allah-Alvarez Ramírez, S. (2018, September 11). Cubans can now join public debates on new Constitution through digital platforms. *Global Voices*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://globalvoices.org/2018/09/11/cubans-can-now-join-public-debates-on-new-constitution-through-digital-platforms/>
- Acanda González, J. L. (1996). Sociedad civil y hegemonía. *Temas*, (6), 87-93. Retrieved November 8, 2017, from http://www.temas.cult.cu/sites/default/files/articulos_academicos_en_pdf/Descargar_articulo_en_250.pdf
- AFP. (2018, March 8). A Cuba, des Youtubers avec peu d'Internet mais une foule d'abonnés. *Le Point International*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/a-cuba-des-youtubers-avec-peu-d-internet-mais-une-foule-d-abonnes-08-03-2018-2200710_24.php
- Aja Díaz, A., Rodríguez Soriano, M. O., Orosa Busutil, R., & Albizu-Campos Espiñeira, J. C. (2017). Migración Internacional en Cuba: Escenarios actuales. *Novedades En Población*, (26), 40-57.
- Alas Tensas. (2019, March 9). Cuba: Feminist Magazine Launches New Ambitious Website. *Havana Times*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://havanatimes.org/?p=149923>
- Alfonso, I. (2018). Rethinking Cuban Civil Society: Something Deeper than the Truth. Retrieved October 22, 2018, from <https://www.rethinkingcubancivilsociety.com/>
- Alfonso, V. (2017, December 17). *Yesapín García (chapter 1)* [YouTube serie]. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_T9DPdFihIk

- Ammachchi, N. (2018, June 27). Google gets closer to Cuba Fiber Optic Deal. *Nearshore Americas*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.nearshoreamericas.com/google-close-reach-deal-cuba-rolling-fiber-optic-cables/>
- Antón, S. (2018, October 4). Cuba signs four memoranda of understanding with Google. *Granma*. Retrieved March 10, 2019, from <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2018-10-04/cuba-signs-four-memoranda-of-understanding-with-google>
- Antón, S. (2019, February 28). Conexión por datos 3G, ¿qué se hace para mejorarla? *Granma*. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2019-02-28/conexion-por-datos-3g-que-se-hace-para-mejorarla-28-02-2019-23-02-15?fbclid=IwAR0PKd4f_rFkpcmanj2Vup47Twqr9GeOmMnY3OYU7MaT7DSq_OfyU-cNDWk
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakardjieva, M. (2011). Reconfiguring the Mediapolis: New media and civic agency. *New Media & Society*, 14(1), 63-79. doi:10.1177/1461444811410398
- BBC. (2018, December 5). Cuba offers 3G mobile internet access to citizens. *BBC News*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46456944>
- Benítez-Rojo, A. (1992). *The Repeating Island. The Caribbean and the postmodern perspective*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, A. (2005). *Culture and Everyday Life*. London/New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Boza Ibarra, G. (2018, July 24). Cubanos descubren y usan Internet móvil antes de tiempo. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://eltoque.com/cubanos-descubren-y-usan-internet-movil-antes-de-tiempo/>
- Boza Ibarra, G. (2019, January 1). ETECSA: el personaje del año 2018 en Cuba. *El Toque*. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <https://eltoque.com/etecsa-internet-cuba-saldo-wifi-nauta->

personaje-del-ano-2018/?fbclid=IwAR0VEqepuibgsj9JBqtkYNjpsVb3EvoAo1N-Fze-UzH8o6zNHomUqWbTNUI

- Brinkmann, S. (2014). *Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Life: Working with Everyday Life Materials*. London: Sage Publications. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473913905>
- Cable submarino Cuba-Venezuela. (n.d.). In *Ecured*. Havana. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from https://www.ecured.cu/Cable_submarino_Cuba-Venezuela.
- Calvo Peña, B. (2010). Internet, comunidad y democracia: La blogosfera cubana teje su propia "isla virtual". In *Buena Vista Social Blog. Internet y libertad de expresión en Cuba* (pp. 147-179). Valencia: Aduana Vieja Editorial.
- Canal USB, Cubadebate. (2018, December 27). [Según Omar Pérez Salomón, funcionario del Comité Central del PCC que atiende Telecomunicaciones, “ya se han comprado más de 700 mil paquetes (del 6 de diciembre al 20), la mayoría de 7 CUC, 600 MB”]. Retrieved December 27, 2018, from <https://t.me/CanalUSB/91>
- Clarín.com. (2018, June 29). Cómo funciona el “WhatsApp cubano” que causa furor en la isla. *Clarín*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from https://www.clarin.com/tecnologia/whatsapp-cubano-suma-200-000-usuarios-primer-semana_0_HkCjbCXMX.html
- Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cuba, Communist Party. (2017, July). Conceptualización del modelo económico y social cubano de desarrollo socialista. Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <http://media.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PDF-510-kb.pdf>
- Cuba, Communist Party. (2017, July). Lineamientos de la política económica y social del Partido y la Revolución para el período 2016-2021. Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <http://media.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PDF-321.pdf>

- Cuba, Council of Ministers. (2011, January 4). [About the distribution of stocks in ETECSA]. *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.gacetaoficial.gob.cu/codedicante.php>
- Cuba, Council of Ministers. (2013). Decree 321/2013. [About the extension of ETECSA's administrative concession, valid until 2036, with a period of exclusivity until 2023]. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <http://www.mincom.gob.cu/sites/default/files/marcoregulatorio/Decreto%20321-2013-Concesion%20Administrativa%20de%20ETECSA-Cuba.pdf>
- Cuba, Council of Ministers. (2017, May 22). Agreement 8151-17. [About the functions of Cuban Ministry of Communications]. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <http://www.mincom.gob.cu/sites/default/files/marcoregulatorio/A%208151-17%20funciones%20especificas%20del%20MINCOM.pdf>
- Cuba, Executive Committee, Council of Ministers (1996, June 14). Decree 209/96. [About the access of the Republic of Cuba to the Global Networks]. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <http://www.ordiecole.com/cuba/209-1996.pdf>
- Cuba, Ministry of Communications. (2015). Resolution 272/2015. [About the importation of telecommunication devices]. Retrieved February 2, 2019, from <http://www.aduana.gob.cu/index.php/viajerp2/send/9-viajeros/45-resolucion-272-15-del-mic>
- Cuba, Ministry of Communications. (2017, July). Política Integral para el Perfeccionamiento de la Informatización de la Sociedad en Cuba. Retrieved December 20, 2018, from http://www.mincom.gob.cu/sites/default/files/Politica%20Integral%20para%20el%20perfeccionamiento%20de%20la%20Informatizacion%20de%20la%20sociedad%20en%20Cuba_0_0.pdf

- Cuba, Ministry of Communications. (2017, September 29). Resolution 257/2017. [About the obligations of the provider of public Internet service]. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <http://www.mincom.gob.cu/sites/default/files/marcoregulatorio/R%20257-17%20Proveedores%20de%20Servicios%20en%20el%20Entorno%20Internet.pdf>
- Cuba, National Assembly. (2019, February 26). *Cuban Constitution*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <http://media.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Constitucion-Cuba-2019.pdf>
- Cuba, ONEI, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información [National Bureau of Statistics],. ONEI. (2018). Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2017. Empleo y salarios. Edición 2018, updated 2019, January 8. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <http://www.one.cu/aec2017/07%20Empleo%20y%20Salarios.pdf>
- Cuba, ONEI, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información [National Bureau of Statistics]. Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información, ONEI. (2018). Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2017. Tecnología de la Información y las Comunicaciones. Edición 2018, updated 2019, January 7. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <http://www.one.cu/aec2017/17%20Tecnologias%20de%20la%20Informacion.pdf>
- Cuba, State Council. (2012, October 16). Law Decree 302, Modification of the Migratory Law. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from http://anterior.cubaminrex.cu/Actualidad/2012/Octubre/ORD_044_IMPRENTA_2012_minjus.pdf
- Cuba, State Council. (2013, February 23). Law-Decree 308/2013. [About the new denomination of the Ministry of Communications]. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from http://www.mincom.gob.cu/sites/default/files/marcoregulatorio/DL_308-13_Cambio_de_denominacion_a_Ministerio_de_Comunicaciones.pdf

- Díaz Rodríguez, E. (2014). *Derechos sexuales en Cuba. Del silencio a la red. Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Sciences of the Information, School of Communication* (Unpublished master's thesis). Havana/University of Havana.
- Díaz, E. (2018, April 4). 14 Independent News Sites Changing Cuban Journalism. Retrieved January 20, 2019, from <https://gijn.org/2018/04/04/14-independent-news-sites-changing-cuban-journalism/>
- Directorio Cubano. (2018, September 23). 3G en Cuba. ¿Cuáles son los celulares compatibles con la red Cubacel? Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <https://www.directoriocubano.info/noticias/ciencia-tecnologia/3g-en-cuba-cuales-son-los-celulares-compatibles-con-la-red-cubacel/>
- Duong, P. (2013). Bloggers Unplugged: Amateur citizens, cultural discourse, and public sphere in Cuba. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 375-397. doi:10.1080/13569325.2013.840277
- EFE/14ymedio (2019, January 19). Solo 70.000 cubanos se conectan a internet desde sus hogares. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from https://www.14ymedio.com/cienciaytecnologia/cubanos-conectan-internet-hogares_0_2586341348.html
- Elizalde, R. M. (2018, June 5). [Personal interview].
- ETECSA (2019, February 1). Nota informativa conjunta UCI-ETECSA.toDus de vuelta! Retrieved March 25, 2019, from http://www.etecsa.cu/inicio/nota_de_prensa_1_02_2019/
- ETECSA. (2019, March 28). Nota conjunta ETECSA-Google para anuncio de firma de Memorándum de Entendimiento. Retrieved March 25, 2019, from http://www.etecsa.cu/inicio/nota_de_prensa_conjunta_etecsa_google/

- ETECSA. (n.d.). Internet en el móvil. Preguntas más frecuentes. Retrieved March 20, 2019, from http://www.etecsa.cu/promocion/internet_en_el_movil/
- ETECSA. (n.d.). Preguntas más frecuentes (Nauta). Retrieved March 10, 2019, from http://www.etecsa.cu/internet_conectividad/pmf/?fbclid=IwAR3eh-8KbHpuO4tI86G_gtliSPiLwAlbPouIo9n6Q-zwSYN-5RnG4xhAFQ#nauta_hogar
- ETECSA_Cuba Servicios Móviles (2019, January 18). [Graphic about the sales of 3G services in Cuba, courtesy of *Cubadebate*]. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <https://www.facebook.com/cubacelenlinea/photos/a.457368321085320/1149162661905879/?type=3&theater>
- Figueredo Reinaldo, O., & Álvarez Guerrero, A. (2019, March 7). ETECSA inicia pruebas con tecnología 4G en La Habana. *Cubadebate*. Retrieved March 8, 2019, from http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2019/03/07/etecsa-inicia-pruebas-con-tecnologia-4g-en-la-habana-video/?fbclid=IwAR359WK_8VsFLty99ygXUqp3-frZJzGLuvEz4J4W1GTv9D8G7b5QGTrXoYk#.XIZ14ihKjIU
- Figueredo Reinaldo, O., Concepción, J. R., Doimeadios Guerrero, D., & Pérez, I. (2018, December 18). Díaz-Canel: La informatización de la sociedad es clave para la participación ciudadana y la soberanía. Retrieved December 20, 2018, from <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/12/18/diaz-canel-la-informatizacion-de-la-sociedad-es-clave-para-la-participacion-ciudadana-y-la-soberania/#.XJ0SKphKjIU>
- Fowler, V. (2018, May 16). [Personal interview].
- Gámez Torres, N. (2019, March 30). Is Google closer to improving Internet access in Cuba? *The Miami Herald*. Retrieved March 31, 2019, from <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article228636089.html>

- García Canclini, N. (1995). *Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- García Díaz, A. (2018, August 7). Recomendaciones para conectarse de forma segura a WIFI_ETECSA. Retrieved August 10, 2018, from http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/08/07/recomendaciones-para-conectarse-de-forma-segura-a-wifi_etecsa/#.XJ0RaZhKjIU
- García Salas, C. (2018, June 15). [Personal interview].
- García, S.E. (2018, August 15). For 9 hours, Cubans got Internet in an unusual place: everywhere. *The New York Times*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/15/world/americas/cuba-internet-mobile-phones.html>
- Gómez, S. A. (2019, January 30). El Estado pierde el monopolio de la asistencia social en Cuba ¿Para bien o para mal? Retrieved February 28, 2019, from https://medium.com/@sergioalejandrogomezgallo/el-estado-pierde-el-monopolio-de-la-asistencia-social-en-cuba-para-bien-o-para-mal-450767d8c8ac?fbclid=IwAR32-kV2VzY9IDdjqhfLMvTE2Oz51wHvt8tZmMUNWNxFYV_sPTPFJH8dNrY
- González Díaz, M. (2018, December 31). 60 años de la Revolución Cubana: 7 cosas cotidianas que hacen de Cuba un país diferente del resto de América Latina. *BBC Mundo*. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-46575032?fbclid=IwAR2TSHMgWV2SdLfJHIwS0x5egsEw-6QN-_565Q4vvdCjH08u4N-DpRn_Iu0
- González, O. (2019, February 8). El Internet en Cuba y su horario pico. *Cubonet*. Retrieved March 8, 2019, from <https://www.cubonet.org/destacados/internet-cuba-horario-pico/?fbclid=IwAR2AS7MuGaGFyxVbfzigkzdxPb363IhhvGYSPzyvkOpTapwH76L-ytxFsgg>

- Guevara, Y. (2019, January 18). Una nueva etapa en la informatización cubana. *Juventud Rebelde*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2019-01-18/sesiona-en-la-uci-2do-taller-nacional-de-informatizacion>
- Henken, T. (2010). En busca de la Generación Y: Yoani Sánchez, la blogosfera emergente y el periodismo ciudadano de la Cuba de hoy. In *Buena Vista Social Blog. Internet y libertad de expresión en Cuba* (pp. 201-242). Valencia: Aduana Vieja Editorial.
- Henken, T. (2017). Cuba's Digital Millennials: Independent Digital Media and Civil Society on the Island of the Disconnected. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 84(2), 429-456.
- Hernández, R. (2003). ¿Pero acaso hay un debate en Cuba sobre la sociedad civil? In *Hablar de Gramsci* (pp. 137-144). Havana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello.
- HiCuba. (n.d.). Comunicaciones telefónicas en Cuba. Breve historia de la telefonía en Cuba. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.hicuba.com/comunicaciones.htm>
- Hoffmann, B. (2004). *The politics of the Internet in Third World Development*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Hoffmann, B. (2011). Civil Society 2.0?: How the Internet Changes State-Society Relations in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Cuba. *GIGA Working Paper*, (156). Retrieved February 20, 2018, from https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/wp156_hoffmann.pdf
- International Telecommunication Union, ITU. (2017). ICT Development Index 2017 – Cuba. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html#idi2017economycard-tab&CUB>
- Kalathil, S., & Boas, T.C. (2003). *Open networks, closed regimes. The impact of the internet on authoritarian rule*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

- López, D.M. (2018, October 7). Recarguita, la nueva aplicación que todos los cubanos amarán. *Periódico Cubano*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from https://www.periodicocubano.com/recarguita-la-nueva-aplicacion-que-todos-los-cubanos-amaran/?utm_source=Cubanos&utm_campaign=2eea7f3309-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_09_25_04_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_42dad8d593-2eea7f3309-69919767
- Macdougall, S. (2017, March 23). Utopia in a Package? Digital Media Piracy and the Politics of Entertainment in Cuba. *Cultural Anthropology*. Retrieved July 20, 2018, from culanth.org
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and new media. Transnational families and polymedia*. London: Routledge.
- Maseda, B. (2018, September 12). Abierto por Inventario. *Proyecto Inventario*. Retrieved September 12, 2018, from <https://proyectoinventario.org/datos-cuba-abierto-por-inventario/>
- Mesa-Lago, C., & Pérez-López, J. (2013). *Cuba under Raul Castro. Assessing the reforms*. Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publisher.
- Miller, D. (Ed.). (1995). *Worlds Apart. Modernity through the prism of the local* (ASA Decennial Series. The Uses of Knowledge: Global and Local relations). London/New York: Routledge.
- Ministerio de Comunicaciones. (n.d.). Historia. Retrieved January 10, 2019, from <http://www.mincom.gob.cu/historia>
- Muñoz Nieves, C. (2018). *The Commodification of Mobile and Internet Communications under State Socialism in Cuba. Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the School of Communication Faculty of Communication, Arts and Technology. (Unpublished Master's thesis)*. Simon Fraser University.

- Olalde Azpiri, M. (2018, April 13). ¿Quién eres, ETECSA? *Periodismo de Barrio*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.periodismodebarrio.org/internetencuba/2018/04/13/quien-eres-etecsa/>
- Oramas Pérez, S. (2016). *Looking for the signal. About the social uses of the WIFI_ETECSA network by the users of the Parque 51 spot in the Havana's municipality of La Lisa. Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the bachelor's degree, Faculty of Communication (unpublished bachelor's thesis)*. Havana, University of Havana.
- Oroza, E. (2016, March 30). Desobediencia Tecnológica: De la revolución al revolico. Retrieved September 17, 2018, from <http://www.technologicaldisobedience.com/es/category/notes/>
- Pérez Jr., L.A. (1999). *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Periódico Cubano. (2018, July 31). Doble censura en la programación del paquete semanal. *Periódico Cubano*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://www.periodicocubano.com/doble-censura-en-la-programacion-del-paquete-semanal/>
- Periódico Cubano. (2018, June 9). Nueva aplicación alternativa en Cuba: Aurora Suite. *Periódico Cubano*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from https://www.periodicocubano.com/nueva-aplicacion-alternativa-en-cuba-aurora-suite/?utm_source=Cubanos&utm_campaign=cd606c23d2-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_06_10_05_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_42dad8d593-cd606c23d2-69919767
- Periodismo de Barrio. (2016, October 16). ¿Quiénes tienen derecho a contar un país? *Periodismo de Barrio*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://www.periodismodebarrio.org/2016/10/quienes-tienen-derecho-a-contar-un-pais/>

- Periodismo de Barrio. (2018, August 9). For Cuba's transnational families, a little internet goes a long way. *Global Voices*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://globalvoices.org/2018/08/09/for-cubas-transnational-families-a-little-internet-goes-a-long-way/#>
- Pertierra, A. C. (2012). If they show prison break in the United States on a Wednesday, by Thursday it is here: Mobile media networks in twenty-first-century Cuba. *Television and New Media*, 13(5), 399-414. doi:10.1177/1527476412443564
- Prensa Latina (2019, February 19). Aumenta cifra de víctimas fatales de tornado en Cuba. *Prensa Latina*. Retrieved February 20, 2019, from <https://www.prensa-latina.cu/index.php?o=rn&id=253595&SEO=aumenta-cifra-de-victimas-fatales-de-tornado-en-cuba>
- Press, L. (2018, August 21). Cuba's 3G Mobile Access Trial – Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty? *CircleID*. Retrieved August 22, 2018, from http://www.circleid.com/posts/20180821_cuba_3g_mobile_access_trial_is_the_glass_half_full_or_half_empty/
- Ragnedda, M. (2017). The evolution of the digital divide. In *The Third Digital Divide. A Weberian Approach to Digital Inequalities* (9-28). New York: Routledge.
- Ravsberg, F. (2014, July 7). El YouTube cubano. *Oncubanews*. Retrieved February 2, 2019, from <https://oncubanews.com/cuba/economia/el-youtube-cubano/>
- Recio Silva, M. (2014, June). *La hora de los desconectados. Evaluación del diseño de la política de "acceso social" a Internet en Cuba en un contexto de cambios*. Concurso CLACSO-Asdi 2013 "Estudios sobre políticas públicas en América Latina y el Caribe: Ciudadanía, democracia y justicia social" (Working paper). Retrieved May 7, 2018, from https://jcguanche.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/recio_trabajo_final.pdf

- Recio, M. (2019, March 4). Cuba ya no es lo que era: el nuevo ecosistema mediático. *Esglobal*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from https://www.esglobal.org/cuba-ya-no-es-lo-que-era-el-nuevo-ecosistema-mediatico/?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=email_this&utm_source=email
- Redacción Cubadebate. (2018, December 28). EFE: Conexión de Cuba a la 3G entre los clic tecnológicos del año en las Américas. *Cubadebate*. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/12/28/efe-conexion-de-cuba-a-la-3g-entre-los-clic-tecnologicos-del-ano-en-las-americas/?fbclid=IwAR24zj9MJwBJer9k5XdSOMRw02eyg43xfwERfMLYIdxsZFY3C-ZFzTpSR5k#.XIZ9yyhKjIU>
- Redacción IPS (2019, February 14). ToDus, WhatsApp o cómo ahorrar datos móviles en Cuba. *IPS*. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <https://www.ipscuba.net/espacios/cuba-20/red-cuba/todus-whatsapp-o-como-ahorrar-datos-moviles-en-cuba/?fbclid=IwAR1P6DXcihMaxkq-iYIt27BB6qBi6XVAzxUdn46AlXa5yAOpSDqJ4adG110>
- Redacción Oncuba. (2014, July 7). Abel Prieto se refiere al Paquete Semanal. *Oncubanews*. Retrieved February 2, 2019, from <https://oncubanews.com/cuba/economia/abel-prieto-se-refiere-al-paquete-semanal/>
- Redacción Oncuba. (2019, January 19). ¿Cuánto han gastado los cubanos por conectarse a Internet móvil? *Oncubanews*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from https://oncubanews.com/cuba/cuanto-han-gastado-los-cubanos-por-conectarse-a-internet-movil/?fbclid=IwAR2vGbtXFG0Iq6HjcJvAgS3ZQ3qVgRqIsHsblt2EcOHh4ft2mkntKrVI6_g
- Revell, T. (2018, June 28). Cuba has a hidden internet system based on trading USB sticks. *NewScientist*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2173008-cuba-has-a-hidden-internet-system-based-on-trading-usb-sticks/>

Ritter, A.R.M., & Henken, T. (2015). *Entrepreneurial Cuba. The Changing Policy Landscape*. Boulder/ London: Lynne Rienner Publisher.

Rodríguez Brito, A. (2018, April 13). La ruta de Internet en Cuba. *Periodismo de Barrio*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.periodismodebarrio.org/internetencuba/2018/04/13/la-ruta-de-internet-en-cuba/>

Rodríguez Fernández, F.A. (2018). *Pero se mueve...Acercamiento a las prácticas de circulación de contenidos audiovisuales en ambientes de redes no institucionales en La Habana. Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Sciences of Communication, School of Communications (Unpublished Master's thesis)*. Havana, University of Havana.

Rodríguez Fernández, F.A. (2019, May 22). [Personal interview].

Rodríguez Soriano, M.O. (2018, July 19). [Personal interview].

Rodríguez Soriano, M.O., & Díaz Varela, Y. (2017). Migración joven y estrategias familiares. Un caso de estudio en el municipio de Plaza de la Revolución. *Novedades en Población*, (26), 185-202.

Rodríguez, A. (2019, February 7). After tornado, Cuban state loses monopoly on disaster aid. *abcNews*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/tornado-cuban-state-loses-monopoly-disaster-aid-60915735>

Rodríguez, F.A., & Machado, M. (2016, May-August). Copia y comparte: Visiones sobre las prácticas de circulación y consumo de bienes culturales en entornos no institucionales en Cuba. *Alcance*, 5(10), 143-170.

- Roque Martínez, J. (2014, November 25). El paquete semanal cubano a debate. *Havana Times*. Retrieved February 2, 2019, from <https://havanatimesenespanol.org/diarios/jimmy-roque/el-paquete-semanal-cubano-a-debate/>
- Roque, J. (2018, December 24). 3G en Cuba: Lo que todos quisieran comprar. *El estornudo*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.revistaelestornudo.com/3g-cuba-lo-todos-quisieran-comprar/>
- Rowlands, M. (1995). Inconsistence temporalities in a nation-space. In *Worlds Apart. Modernity through the prism of the local* (ASA Decennial Series. The Uses of Knowledge: Global and Local relations, pp. 23-42). London/New York: Routledge.
- Sanchez, I. (2019, February 3). Vi... *Cubadebate*. Retrieved February 10, 2019, from <http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2019/02/03/vi/#.XIk6BKBKjIU>
- Slater, D. (2013). *New media, development and globalization: making connection in the Global South*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Spot de Fin de Año* [Advertisement]. (2018, December). Cuban National Television. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSg-r7Z_1Qo&feature=share (Youtube Channel, Alberto Piñeiro, posted January 1, 2019).
- Statcounter GlobalStats. (2019). Social Media Stats in Cuba – February 2019. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/cuba>
- State Department (2018, November 20). U.S. Department of State Cuba Internet Task Force; Notice of Open Meeting. *Federal Register*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/11/20/2018-25272/us-department-of-state-cuba-internet-task-force-notice-of-open-meeting>
- Sundaram, R. (1999). Recycling modernity: Pirate electronic cultures in India. *Third Text*, 13(47), 59-65. DOI: 10.1080/09528829908576796

- Tamayo, R., & Labacena, Y. (2019, February 10). Así marcha el trabajo por cuenta propia, según Juventud Rebelde. *Cubadebate*. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2019/02/10/asi-marcha-el-trabajo-por-cuenta-propia-segun-juventud-rebelde/?fbclid=IwAR1fOHmmfSKE8LWBZZwf5NdFVv0gtO4yYWW1LmufDFyMMrObGy1Wxn_Dm-o#.XIfchihKjIX
- Telecompaper. (2019, January 23). Cuba up to 70,000 home internet connections. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.telecompaper.com/news/cuba-up-to-70000-home-internet-connections--1277419>
- The Associate Press. (2019, March 29). Cuba signs deal with Google to connect to modern internet. *CBC*. Retrieved March 29, 2019, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/cuba-google-internet-1.5076587>
- The Economist. (2017, December 7). Cuba's leaders are trapped between the need for change and the fear of it. Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2017/12/07/cubas-leaders-are-trapped-between-the-need-for-change-and-the-fear-of-it>
- Thompson, C. (2018, May 3). Inside Cuba's massive, weekly, human-curated sneakernet. *Boing Boing*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://boingboing.net/2018/05/03/inside-cubas-massive-weekly.html>
- Todo lo que necesitas saber sobre la navegación con 3G. (2018, August 17). *Juventud Rebelde*. Retrieved August 17, 2018, from <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/ciencia-tecnica/2018-08-17/todo-lo-que-necesitas-saber-sobre-la-telefonía-con-3g>
- Triana, J. (2018, May 10). [Personal interview].
- United States of America, Congress. (1992). Cuban Democracy Act (CDA). United States Code. Title 22 "Foreign relations and intercourse". Chapter 69. [Sponsor: Sen. Robert Torricelli].

- Retrieved February 28, 2019, from <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/cda.pdf>
- United States of America, Congress. (1996). Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad). Public Law 104-114/104th Congress. Retrieved February 28, 2019, from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-110/pdf/STATUTE-110-Pg785.pdf>
- Urra, P. (2018, May 9). [Personal interview].
- Valdés, N.P., & Rivera, M.A. (1999). The Political Economy of the Internet. Retrieved June 25, 2018, from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.210.6677&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Venegas, C. (2010). *Digital dilemmas. The State, the individual and the digital media in Cuba*. New Brunswick/New Jersey/London: Rutger Press.
- Viera Cañive, E. (2018, April 13). Internet en Cuba: ¿limitada por la política o la economía? *Periodismo de Barrio*. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from <https://www.periodismodebarrio.org/internetencuba/2018/04/13/internet-en-cuba-limitada-por-la-politica-o-la-economia/>
- Vigil-Hayes, M., Matthews, J., Acker, A., & Carter, D. (2018, November 30). Reflections on alternative Internet models and how they inform more mindful connectivity. *ICT Discoveries, Special Issue*, (2). Retrieved March 12, 2019, from <https://www.itu.int/en/journal/002/Documents/ITU2018-14.pdf>
- Warf, B. (2013). Origins, Growth, and Geographies of the Global Internet. In *Global Geographies of the Internet*. Rotterdam: Springer Netherlands. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-1245-4_2.
- We are social/Hootsuite. (2018). Digital in 2018 in the Caribbean. Retrieved April 11, 2018, from <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-the-caribbean-part-1-west-86863340>

Appendix A

List of Participants

Participant	Age (range)	Gender	Level of education	Employment	Declared practices online
01	45-50	Man	High	Self-employed	Group B
02 (Eliana)	50-55	Woman	Middle	State-employee	Group A
03	55-60	Woman	High	Self-employed (owner)	Group A
04	50-55	Woman	Middle	Self-employed	Group A
05	50-55	Woman	High	Not working	Group B
06 (Jaime)	20-25	Man	University student	-	Group B
07 (Dianelis)	25-30	Woman	High	Working for a foreign enterprise	Group B
08 (Arianne)	50-55	Woman	High	Retired, and self-employed	Group A
09 (Yohan)	30-35	Man	Unfinished University education	Self-employed (Independent, he manages a private online magazine)	Group B
10 (Alina)	50-55	Woman	Middle	Self-employed	Group A
11 (Ramón)	25-30	Man	Middle	Independent (musician)	Group B
12	35-40	Man	Undefined	Unemployed	-
13	20-25	Man	Middle	Independent (musician)	Group A
14 (Karen)	20-25	Woman	University student	Works for independent media outlets	Group B
15	60-65	Woman	High	Retired	Group A
16 (Joel)	16-20	Man	College student	-	Group B
17 (Tamara)	30-35	Woman	Middle	Lives abroad	-
18 (Santiago)	45-50	Man	Middle	Lives abroad	-
19	20-25	Woman	Middle	Not working	Group A
20 (Nancy)	35-40	Woman	Middle	Self-employed	Group A
21 (Lisandra)	25-30	Woman	High	State-employee	Group A
22 (Armando)	45-50	Man	High	Self-employed	Group B
23	16-20	Man	High school student	-	Group A

24	20-25	Woman	College student	-	Group A
25 (Samantha)	20-25	Woman	High	State-employee, independent, YouTuber	Group B
26	15-20	Woman	College student	YouTuber	Group B
27 (Lester)	30-35	Man	High	Independent (he manages a private media)	Group B
28 (Alejandro)	30-35	Man	Middle	Self-employed (app developer)	Group B
29 (Yandro)	25-30	Man	Middle	State-employee and YouTuber	Group B
30	65-70	Woman	Middle	Retired	Group A
31 (Juan Mario)	70-75	Man	High	Retired	Group A
32 (Ramona)	70-75	Woman	High	Retired	Group A
33	70-75	Man	High	Retired	Group A

*Only the participants directly mentioned on the thesis has a pseudonym.

**Under the Group A, I gathered the participants who claim to have a basic approach to the Internet (only to establish communication with someone abroad or doing basic posting on social networks). Under the Group B, I labeled the participants who claim to have a more engaged approach to the Internet (working online or taking advantage of connectivity to advance their careers). The borders between Group A and B are permeable.

***High education corresponds to graduates from College/University level. Middle, to graduates from Technical Schools or 12 degree of basic education.

****The distinction between Self-employed and Independent lies on the fact that the second group works in an activity no regulated by Cuban rules about self-employment. In case 9, although working under the umbrella of self-employment rules, his main activity relates to an online media, and it was in that capacity that he was interviewed.

Appendix B

List of Experts

Elizalde, Rosa Miriam. An expert in the Cuban communicative system. Her name is associated to the recently approved Policy of Communication, which should result in a legal decree concerning the management of media on the Island.

Fowler, Víctor. Cuban essayist and writer. A significant part of his essay production is devoted to providing socio-cultural approaches to alternative networks and forms of cultural production.

Rodríguez Osorio, María Ofelia. Sociologist, an expert in migration. She is a researcher at the Center of Demographic Researches (CEDEM), University of Havana.

Rodríguez, Fidel Alejandro. Professor at the Faculty of Communication, University of Havana, where he specializes in alternative forms of circulation of content in Cuba.

Salas García, Carolina. A researcher in Cuban Center of Research about Youth (Havana).

Triana, Juan. Cuban economist. An expert on self-employment, and a professor at the Center for Researching Cuban Economy (Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana), University of Havana.

Urra González, Pedro. Co-founder of Infomed. He is an expert in the development of information systems. He has collaborated in several projects connected to the ICTs in Latin America.

Appendix C

Guide for conversations with Participants

(The conversations ran free, and some of these questions were irrelevant in the context of the interviewees' narratives).

- When did you hear about the Internet?
- What is your life story related to the Internet?
- How frequently do you access Internet, and how relevant is this experience for you?
- How do you guarantee your access to the Internet?
- Which are your economic strategies concerning the access?
- Which are your most common practices online? Which sites do you visit? Which are your priorities?
- Do you feel comfortable using the public wi-fi spot service? Which are the main difficulties and advantages that you find in this option?
- Is the access to the Internet relevant in your live? Why?
- Before having access to the Internet, how did you satisfied the needs or desires that you cover now with the access?
- How do you evaluate the impact of the Internet in your everyday life?
- How do you envisage the future of this service in Cuba? What should be the role of the State?
- How do you summarize the experience as Internet users in a word or a sentence?
- The best experience/anecdote in the Internet? The worst?
- Free association of ideas: what is the first word that comes to your head when I say "Internet"? And "wi-fi"?

Appendix D

Guide for the interviews with the experts

- What characterizes Cubans' relationship with communication technologies?
- In their relationship with these technologies, which are the main skills/features and limitations of Cuban users?
- What is your opinion about the integration of new technologies, such as the Internet, in Cubans' everyday life?
- What are the main supports and obstacles for Cubans' use of new technologies?
- How does the use of new technologies intersect with other aspects of Cubans' everyday life, such as the family economy and the relationships with family/friend/business associates abroad?
- Do you consider Internet access a practice that empowers common Cuban users?
- What are the main risks of the Internet access in Cubans everyday life?
- Could you please provide your insight into the intersection of Internet practices with elements such as gender, age, and occupation?

Appendix E
Free Association of Ideas

Participants	Internet	Wi-Fi
01	Keep informed	Necessity
02	Development; Knowledge	Happiness
07	Challenge	Phenomenon
08	Hope	A necessity
09	Future	The sun
10	Communication	Craziness
11	Interest	Precision
14	Information	A park
16	Knowing the world, accessing knowledge	A signal
17	Information	Union
18	Everything	Difficulty
19	Knowing the world	A little bit difficult
20	A window open to the world; Civilization	
21	A necessity	A necessity
22	Family	A bench
23	Information	Access
24	Family	Hot
25	Professional growth; success	Opportunity
26	Knowledge	Hot; Difficulty
27	Fatigue	Disconnection; Frustration
28	Nothing compares to the Internet	Wireless
29	Wi-Fi	Videos
30	Facebook	Connection

31	Immediacy; Communication	Communication
32	Happiness	Fast
33	Modernity; Development	

Participants 3 to 6 offered very elaborated answers to this exercise, and they cannot be reduced to a word. Participant 12 recognized that he did not have a direct experience related to the Internet and the wi-fi experiences (he only knew about those experiences for others' stories). The answers of participant 13 were inaudible. Participant 15 did not answer the question. Participants 20 and 33 did not answer about the wi-fi experience because they have never used the hotspots to access the Internet.

Appendix F

Cuba, Internet and the World (sample of memorable quotes)

- [I access the Internet] “To keep myself current about the news in the world” (Part. 01)
- “Cuba is one of the countries with a worst connection to the Internet in the world ... Worldwide everybody has access to the Internet, and here, we have this limitation” (Part. 02, Eliana)
- “People [in Cuba] has a predisposition [to understand technologies], maybe because we need to insert ourselves into the world ... Cuba is not inserted in the world” (Part. 03)
- [The Internet] “must be like everywhere else, directly on your phone ... Internet is important everywhere ... Everybody knows everything worldwide [thanks to the Internet] ... [The family abroad tells me] ‘You are living with your back to the world’” (Part. 04)
- “You begin discovering a world there [on the Internet], it is like entering into a book of adventures. You read, and read, and you just can’t disengage ... [People access] to see how it is going in the world ... [The Internet] is something common in the world, and we belong to the world” (Part. 05)
- [With the access] “A world of knowledge opened to me ... With the same 20 or 30 dollars [that we use to access the Internet] in any other country we could have a regular access” (Part. 06, Jaime)
- “Worldwide, my colleagues do the accounting [process] online. Only Cuba has an offline system” [in her enterprise] (Part. 07, Dianelis)
- “I know there is a world outside which we, the Cubans, mainly ignore ... There is a route to do what everybody elsewhere do ... There is a necessity to know another world, to know that there is a world outside” (Part. 08, Arianne)

- “Everybody wants to access the Internet” (Part. 09, Johan)
- “The Internet is a way to communicate with the whole world and get information” (Part. 13)
- “I like the virtual world, the social networks ... I demand to have [access] everywhere ... as it happens worldwide” (Part. 14, Karen)
- “Today, I understand that computers, the Internet and in general, communications move the world. This is the world of technologies” (Part. 15)
- “Right not, worldwide, Internet is a big part of everybody’s lives ... If you want to know anything about the current world, you need to go to the park ... The access is important any place in the world ... [Here] is not like everywhere, where everybody has access to the Internet” (Part. 16, Joel)
- “When a Cuban [in the Island] writes you [using the Internet], everybody [in Miami] runs to know what’s wrong, because everybody knows that it has taken a lot of work to get the access” (Part. 17, Tamara)
- “Cuba can’t be the only country in the world where people don’t have the access at home ... The poorest countries in the world have access to the Internet” (Part. 18, Santiago)
- [The Internet] “allows you to open a door to the world ... It would be great to have the Internet at home. You turn up your modem, and that’s all. You are connected to the whole world ... And, I imagine that eventually, with the money you pay, you will be able to get access 24 hours, or the time you need it, like everywhere else” (Part. 20, Nancy)
- “We can’t remain isolated to the world, nobody can make us be isolated to the world ... Maybe not in all the countries, but in most of the countries they have the Internet ... Technology and the Internet show us how the world lives ... We live like nobody else in the world. We depend on the State, on everything that ‘they’ say. And ‘they’ are afraid of

losing what we have ... Not everything is about the Internet. But I believe the Internet occupies a second place of priority because the Internet is changing the world” (Part. 21, Lisandra)

- [The first time he subscribed to a magazine online, and the magazine arrived home, he felt] “I’m in the world, this is unbelievable (*laughs*) ... Thanks to the connection, people start having references beyond the reduced reality where we live” (Part. 22, Armando)
- “My sister uses it [the Internet] to socialize, to see the world” (Part. 24)
- “Everybody has access to the Internet. Not everybody I know, like my friends, but EVERYBODY ... In Africa, they know what it is, the Internet. I can’t tell you how much access they have, but probably more than us ... [Internet is] the way to introduce yourself to the world, even though you can’t travel yet” (Part. 25, Samantha)
- “YouTube was the mean I found to present myself to Cuba and the world” (Part. 26)
- “I can’t imagine my work today without the Internet. I know it’s a mental limitation, maybe, and for some of us, with nostalgic mentalities, the Internet is like a succedaneum of the real world” (Part. 27, Lester)
- “The connection is like being in the real world” (Part. 28, Alejandro)
- “Since I first felt interested on the computers, I discovered there was an unexplored world called the Internet ... [When he publishes his first video on YouTube, he receives a message]: ‘It’s so good that Cubans are doing the same that everybody else worldwide!’” (Part. 29, Yandro)
- “I hope that the Internet will be like everywhere else, more open ... My best experience online is having access to information and the communication with my beloved people that are not near me anymore” (Part. 31, Juan Mario)
- [Thanks to the Nauta Hogar] “We can connect to the world” (Part. 32, Ramona)

- [Why was so difficult to have access?] “I believe that it was for fear of knowing the real world. And it’s good to know the real world, because you know the good, and the bad things” (Part. 33)

Appendix G

Letter of Information/Consent (Participants)

Study Title: How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?

Name of Researcher: Xenia Reloba de la Cruz, master's Program, Cultural Studies, Queen's University

You are invited to take part in a research study looking at the presence and impact of Internet access in Cubans' everyday life. If you agree to take part, I will interview you for no more than one hour at a public or private location and at a moment of your choice. The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. You can stop participating at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study up until March 31st, 2019, by contacting me at 17xrdl@queensu.ca. I will then destroy all data collected.

While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, study results will contribute to a better understanding of practices of communication through the internet Wi-Fi spots in Cuba. There is no obligation for you to say yes to take part in this study.

I don't envisage any significant risk for taking part in this study. I won't use your name or other personal information that could reveal your identity in the thesis or publications resulting from this research. Your identity, collected in this consent form, will be protected with a pseudonym. The code list linking real names with pseudonyms will be stored separately and securely from the anonymous data on a password-protected encrypted device (flash drive). Other demographic data, such as gender, the range of age, and occupation will be collected, because it could be pertinent to my research. Other than me and my research team members, nobody will have access to any of the data. I will keep your data securely for at least five years.

I hope to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. Although I will include quotes from some of the interviews when presenting my findings, I will keep your identity confidential. During the interview, please let me know if you say anything you do not want me to quote or any other concern related to the information that you are providing and its potential use.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisors Susan Lord (lords@queensu.ca) or Karen Dubinsky (dubinsky@queensu.ca). If you have any ethical concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll-free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether to participate or not in this research study. If you feel safer offering a verbal consent, I can audio-record your consent. That recording will be treated the same way the other confidential information that you have provided.

Keep one copy of the Letter of Information for your records and return one copy to the researcher, Xenia Reloba de la Cruz.

By signing below, I am verifying that: I have read the Letter of Information and all of my questions have been answered.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H

Letter of Information/Consent (Experts)

Study Title: How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?

Name of Researcher: Xenia Reloba de la Cruz, Master's Program, Cultural Studies, Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario, Canada)

You are invited to take part in a research study looking at the presence and impact of the Internet access in Cubans' everyday life. If you agree to take part, I will interview you for no more than one hour at a public or private location you choose. The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, study results will contribute to a better understanding of recent practices of communication through the internet Wi-Fi spots in Cuba.

There is no obligation for you to agree to take part in this study. The interview will consist of a conversation related to your knowledge about Cubans' communication practices through technologies and the relationship between public policies and everyday experiences. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. You can stop participating at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study up until March 31st, 2019 by contacting me at 17xrdl@queensu.ca. I will then destroy all data collected.

If you agree to participate, I will keep your data securely for at least five years. I may reveal your identity while quoting you in the thesis or publications resulting from this research. I hope to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. Although I don't envisage any risk for taking part in this study, please, let me know during the interview if you

say anything you do not want me to quote or any other concern related to the information that you are providing and its potential use.

If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll-free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If you have any questions about the research, please contact my supervisors Susan Lord (slord@queensu.ca) or Karen Dubinsky (dubinsky@queensu.ca).

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether to participate or not in this research study.

Keep one copy of the Letter of Information for your records and return one copy to the researcher, Xenia Reloba de la Cruz.

By signing below, I am verifying that: I have read the Letter of Information and all my questions have been answered.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix I

Guide for verbal recruitment

- Introduce myself, and briefly explain where I'm coming from and the general topic of my research.
- I explain the potential participants that I'm interested in their experiences as users of the Internet and the wi-fi hotspots service. I advance them that all the information collected will remain anonymous.
- I offer them to provide more information/details if they want to talk about it later, in the place and the moment of their choice.
- I offer them my email and my phone number.

Appendix J

GREB Clearance letter

April 19, 2018

Ms. Xenia Reloba de la Cruz

Master's Student

Cultural Studies Program

Queen's University

Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GCUL-078-18; TRAQ # 6023484

Title: "GCUL-078-18 How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?"

Dear Ms. Reloba de la Cruz:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GCUL-078-18 How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on “Events”; under “Create New Event” click on “General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form”). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on “Events”; under “Create New Event” click on “General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies”. Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dean Tripp, Ph.D.

Chair

General Research Ethics Board

c:

Dr. Susan Lord and Dr. Karen Dubinsky, Supervisors

Dr. Dorit Naaman, Chair, Unit REB

Ms. Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.



April 19, 2018

Ms. Xenia Reloba de la Cruz
Master's Student
Cultural Studies Program
Queen's University
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GCUL-078-18; TRAQ # 6023484
Title: "GCUL-078-18 How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?"

Dear Ms. Reloba de la Cruz:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "**GCUL-078-18 How to stay connected in an 'offline' country?**" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Tripp".

Dean Tripp, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Susan Lord and Dr. Karen Dubinsky, Supervisors
Dr. Dorit Naaman, Chair, Unit REB
Ms. Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.