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What is This?
Political communication in the Cuban blogosphere: A case study of Generation Y

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Abstract
Blogs have become a communicative alternative for Cuban civil society in recent years. Cuban communities, inside and outside the island, are characterized by substantial ideological differences and economic gaps that highlight the challenges for consensus building and collective action in the country’s politics. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), however, are gradually facilitating the creation of spaces outside the control of the state for the exchange of ideas about the present and future of the nation. Through content analysis and qualitative interpretation, we undertake a case study of the most renowned Cuban blog, ‘Generación Y’, to evaluate users’ participation, the content they generate for the site, and the nature of debates taking place within it. Our findings show that while this blog opens an unprecedented opportunity for Cubans to engage in relatively unrestricted political dialogue, its users tend to favour expressive participation and antagonistic exchanges over the rational deliberations associated with traditional conceptualizations of the notion of the public sphere.

Keywords
Cuba, blogosphere, blogs, Generación Y, Internet, political communication, public sphere, Yoani Sánchez

Introduction
Generación Y (Generation Y, http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/), a blog created by Yoani Sánchez, a young female resident of Havana, Cuba, has become one of the most dynamic and visible communicative spaces of that country’s political landscape since its
appearance on 9 April 2007 (Schaun and Aguiar, 2009). Written with a minimalist tone, the blog has situated itself at the centre of the ideological debates of a broad community of users who keenly follow its posts and contribute a large number of opinions and follow-up comments to each entry. One aspect that makes this blog unique is that its author works from within Cuba, unlike most blogs about that country, and, more importantly, she does it from the everyday perspective of a woman.

The presence of the blog has brought about important consequences for Cuban politics. The first has to do with the change it has caused in the definition of the public opinion’s agenda within Cuba. The website has introduced topics that were until recently off the radar of local mass media, exploring them in a plain and critical language that differs radically from the Cuban official press’ triumphalism. Issues such as restrictions on civil and political rights inside the island, the existence of a significant crisis of values, and national economic disintegration, to mention a few examples, have now a place for debate thanks to the Internet and the emergence of a civil society increasingly active against the status quo. While the challenges that many ordinary Cubans face to access the Internet have been used by some observers to question the real impact of Generation Y on public opinion inside the island (Duvergel, 2008), the blog has achieved enough following and resonance to make it impossible for the government in that country to ignore it.

Second, Generation Y has succeeded in putting at risk the institutions of an official communication apparatus too centred on itself. It is a space for public communication beyond direct control from the state and, consequently, it has been able to escape the traditional delegitimization tactics practised by the Cuban government against voices critical to the revolution. In this context, bloggers such as Yoani Sánchez explicitly identify themselves as ordinary citizens, rather than as journalists, activists or representatives of any organization. Because of this lack of formal affiliation, it has not been easy to sustain accusations against these bloggers of violating professional codes or of being paid mercenaries at the service of foreign powers.

Finally, Generation Y has made evident the strong ideological fissures of Cuban society, shattering the supposedly monolithic unity of the local polity alleged by the government. The very title of the site refers to the generational variable as one of the elements to take into account on the Cuban political scene, as evidenced by the contrast between two historical eras: the current one, and one closer to the past strong days of the Cuban revolution’s leadership.

This article presents a case study of Generation Y aimed at assessing the role of this blog in the establishment of a communicative space akin to a Cuban public sphere for citizens within and outside that country. With that purpose in mind, empirical evidence collected between 2009 and 2010 regarding the blog’s traffic, the subjects of regular posts on it, moderation of followers’ contributions, the nature of the interaction between the blogger and her audience, the communication dynamics among the followers, and participants’ assertion of their own identities (political and otherwise) is explored in the light of recent literature on the impact of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) on political deliberation. Particularly relevant for our study are the works of Dahlgren (2005), Mouffe (1999), Dahlberg (2007), López García (2006), Castells (2008) and Resina de la Fuente (2010) on the challenges posed by ICTs for a new conceptualization of the public sphere that accounts for the growing phenomena of
geographical dispersion, transnational reach, diverse membership, horizontal organizing, plural identities, fragmented agendas, transient commitments, quick mobilization, and the frequently mob-like collective actions that characterize many contemporary forms of civic engagement.

Our case study adopts a dual methodological approach that combines a systematic content analysis with a qualitative reading of posts by its administrator and of comments and identity cues by the blog’s followers. Data gathering took place through daily visits to the blog site between July 2009 and July 2010. We decided to study the blog in a period in which Yoani Sánchez was particularly prominent in news media around the world, due to the fact that President Barack Obama publicly responded to some questions she has asked him in her blog, her participation in a number of public debates in Havana, her temporary arrest by Cuban government agents, and the attacks she suffered on the streets of Havana from pro-Castro mobs.

In the following sections of this article, we provide some general background about the context of Internet access and use in Cuba within which the blog, Generation Y, operates, as well as an introduction to the theoretical framework that informs our study. Then we present the results of our content analysis through a description of major patterns with regard to the subjects, language, interaction and self-representation that emerged from our data. Lastly, we explain our findings against the backdrop of recent theories of the public sphere that question the notions of homogeneity, open deliberation, consensus building and consequentiality implicit in Habermas’ (1989) normative model of the public sphere.

### Blogging in Cuba: Odds and opportunities

Generation Y operates in a complex environment. No Cuban citizen can host a site on a national server; in fact, the blog of our case study is located on a German server, belonging to the company Strato, part of Deutsch Telekom. Private access to the Internet at home is still illegal and possible only through the black market or through hotels and tourist resorts, at prices well beyond the purchasing power of the average wage-earner in Cuba.

Because of commercial restrictions imposed by the US and Cuba’s weak economic structure, the quality of Internet connections within the island is very poor. Connectivity relied mostly on an expensive satellite link with limited capacity, although a project to provide the country with a fibre optic submarine cable, sponsored by the Venezuelan government, was completed in 2012 and began partial operations in January 2013. Until that broadband connection becomes a reality, however, Cuban authorities have banned access to the Generation Y blog, a prohibition circumvented by tech-savvy residents in the country.

The Cuban government encourages Internet use in institutionalized and state-run spaces. In private homes, on the other hand, only registered journalists authorized by the authorities are allowed an individual connection. Health-care providers and artists also have the option to access the Cuban intranet, which includes international email capabilities, as long as they have explicit permission from their respective institutes of affiliation.

Cuban authorities banned access to the Generation Y blog between 2008 and 2011, a prohibition circumvented by tech-savvy residents in the country. In these circumstances,
Yoani Sánchez uses a network of several collaborators in Europe and other regions in the world, who help her not only with maintaining her blog, but also translating its contents into different languages.

Thus, Generation Y has grown into a space for political debate as public awareness of its existence has gradually increased. Such awareness began spreading virally and by word of mouth, as is the case with most Internet-related phenomena. Yet, as early as 2007, foreign media began to notice Cuba’s nascent blogging wave and, in October of that year, the news agency, Reuters, published an article about blogs in Cuba, with particular emphasis on the work of Yoani Sánchez (Israel, 2007). Two months later, The Wall Street Journal carried a story devoted exclusively to the blogger and her interpretation of Cuban reality (The Wall Street Journal, 2007).

From that point on, Sánchez captured the attention of foreign media and appeared in interviews in leading publications in the world, such as El País (Spain), The New York Times, Newsweek and The Washington Post (US) and Die Zeit (Germany).

In February 2008, foreign journalists travelling to Havana to cover the inauguration of Raul Castro as the new head of government, after Fidel Castro’s retirement because of health issues, conducted several interviews with Yoani Sánchez. International media found in Generation Y a new phenomenon in the context of traditional ideological debates about Cuban reality and started paying attention to this blog as a potential indicator of the climate of public opinion among young adults in Cuba. In late March 2008, the Cuban government blocked access to Generation Y for Internet users inside the island as a consequence of the growing importance given to the blog by media around the world. In fact, all the blogs on the website DesdeCuba.com were blocked. In April of that year, Alvaro Vargas Llosa, son of Nobel laureate Peruvian-Spanish writer Mario Vargas Llosa, and a journalist with a highly critical stance against Fidel and Raul Castro, devoted a column in The Washington Post to the censorship the Cuban government was exercising on the blog (Vargas Llosa, 2008).

The Cuban government’s decision to block access to Generation Y was read by many as a tacit acknowledgment of the space that the blog had been gradually carving for itself as an arena for public discussion the reality of life in Cuba. However, an explicit sign of this came a few months later from Fidel Castro. In his preface to the book, Fidel, Bolivia y Algo Más, a text also reproduced by the official Cuban newspaper, Granma, in June 2008, the leader of the Cuban revolution quoted several statements by Yoani Sánchez without ever mentioning her name. In that text, Fidel Castro dismissed Sánchez, bloggers like her and their followers as mere pawns of old and contemporary imperialistic forces:

Arguments like those [he talks about the arguments he quoted from Sánchez] are bad enough, as they get immediately reproduced by the mass media of the empire; but it is even worse that there can be young Cubans who share this way of thinking, [they are] special envoys who do servile work and neocolonial propaganda on behalf of the old colonial master that today rewards them. (Castro, 2008: para. 82; translated from the original text in Spanish)

Fidel Castro was referring to the Ortega y Gasset international journalism award, granted to Yoani Sánchez by the Spanish newspaper, El País, in April 2008. Sánchez asked the Cuban authorities to be allowed to travel to Madrid to collect the prize, but the government denied her permission. In November 2008, Sánchez began collaborating with the US
online publication, *The Huffington Post*. And just one year later, in November 2009, the blogger was successful in getting President Barack Obama to answer questions she sent him via email for Generation Y. Obama expressed his full support to the Cuban blogosphere and to spaces such as Generation Y, working in defence of freedom of expression.

Your blog provides the world a unique window into the realities of daily life in Cuba. It is telling that the Internet has provided you and other courageous Cuban bloggers with an outlet to express yourself so freely, and I applaud your collective efforts to empower fellow Cubans to express themselves through the use of technology. The government and people of the United States join all of you in looking forward to the day all Cubans can freely express themselves in public without fear and without reprisals. (Obama, 2009: para. 2)

Generation Y has established itself as a major forum for discussing the Cuban political situation and everyday life in the country. This status, however, is not free of controversy since the polarization that affects most debates about Cuban politics compels any content about current events on the island to be seen through the lens of either a fervent and unconditional defence of the Cuban revolution or a rabid anti-Castro stance. As a result of changes to immigration policies adopted by the Cuban government, Yoani Sánchez was finally allowed to travel abroad on February 2013. She visited a number of countries, including Brazil, Mexico, Peru, the United States, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Spain, to meet with both supporters and detractors of her blog.

Hence, a number of commentators with a favourable view of the Cuban process have responded to the international rewards and recognitions received by Generation Y with suggestions about possible connections between Yoani Sánchez and foreign sponsors from governments and corporations hostile to the revolution, or by suggesting a conspiracy of pro-capitalist media and organizations to artificially inflate young dissident voices in Cuba. An example of the scepticism some observers have tried to cast over Generation Y is a widely circulated text by French academic and journalist Salim Lamrani, entitled ‘The contradictions of Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez’, originally published by VoltaireNet.org in November 2009 and then reproduced by many left-leaning publications, including the *Monthly Review* in the US and the Venezuelan socialist portal, Aporrea.org. In his article, Lamrani raises questions about Sanchez’s ability to maintain Generation Y without strong financial and technical support from foreign agencies, pinpoints what he deems to be inconsistencies in Sánchez’s accounts of harassment by the Cuban government and finally accuses her of profiting from her critical position regarding Cuba’s current affairs.

Sanchez is an astute person who has understood perfectly well that she could prosper quickly with this type of discourse so valued by the Western press. She has worked out a tacit agreement with the communications and information transnationals [sic]. For the Western media to grant one the status of ‘independent blogger’, and to enjoy some media space, it is essential to speak out against the system and the government and to demand radical change, more specifically to return to private enterprise capitalism, and not to content oneself with just denouncing some aberrations in the system. (Lamrani, 2009: para. 29)

In the highly divided and conflictive atmosphere that characterizes Cuban political communication, it is evident that Generation Y cannot escape becoming a target within the
ideological confrontations of people in favour of or against the Cuban revolution. Nevertheless, the fact that the blog welcomes unrestricted debates among its followers on matters of public interest in that country, and the fact that it has received recognition from a variety of organizations in different countries (from media to academic institutions) with no connections or affiliations among them, makes Generation Y worth a systematic analysis such as the case study presented here. The distinctions obtained by the blog, which Yoani Sánchez admits provides some degree of protection for her work in Cuba (Sánchez, 2009), include the Ortega y Gasset award from the Spanish daily, *El País*, in 2008; the selection of Sánchez by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of that year; the BOB’s award by the German Television network for best weblog; a special mention by the 2009 Maria Moors Cabot Award for excellence in journalism by Columbia University; and inclusion in the list of top 25 blogs in the world in 2009 by both *Time* magazine and CNN.

**A global, discursive public sphere**

Literature about the impact of ICTs on the configuration and dynamics of the public sphere is, by now, vast and mature. A number of authors (Davis, 1999; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004; White, 1997) have highlighted the opportunities brought about by the Internet in providing forums and networking possibilities for social groups traditionally marginalized from the bourgeois, white, male-dominated public sphere that originally served as a basis for Habermas’ normative model (1989). In this sense, there is scholarly output contending that ICTs provide new and/or expand old spaces for the constitution of public spheres (Savigny, 2002; Simone, 2008). Other scholars, however, have explored the unique characteristics that exchanges on matters of public interest adopt on the Internet, to point out their inadequacy or dysfunctionality as real public spheres (Cammaerts and van Audenhove, 2005; Galston, 2003).

A third perspective in this debate proposes a revision of Habermas’ model to account for structural changes in democratic civil societies, where rational political debate has been replaced by negotiation, competition or exchange among a plurality of social groups defined by and/or mobilized around specific identities, issues and lifestyles, and which frequently act (and interact) in spaces outside mainstream political organizations, media outlets and social institutions. For example, Dahlgren (2000, 2005) contends that what many observers note as a contemporary crisis of representative and deliberative democracy (e.g., people’s increasing disengagement with political parties and voters’ apathy) is rather a profound process of reconfiguration of socio-political practices that he has termed ‘civic cultures’. In this process, individuals are redefining the terms of civil participation in ways that privilege expression over debate, cultural affiliations over geopolitical ones, and localized agency over broader sovereignty,

...A key assumption here is that a viable democracy must have an anchoring at the level of citizens’ lived experiences, personal resources, and subjective dispositions. The notion of civic cultures grafts some fruitful elements from cultural theory onto some more familiar themes from political communication. This highlights that such dimensions as meaning, identity, and subjectivity are important elements of political communication. (Dahlgren, 2005: 158)
Central to this process of reconfiguration of socio-political practices is the appropriation of ICTs by different social actors, including those traditionally marginalized, for the creation of expressive (not necessarily deliberative) spaces where engagement in public life frequently takes non- or pre-political forms, ‘but which may develop towards politics …’ The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension: The political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed’ (Dahlgren, 2005:158).

The thesis of emerging online public spheres where individual or collective expression prevails over purposive political deliberation is supported by a growing number of scholars. Thus, studies by López García (2006) and Resina de la Fuente (2010) found that online exchanges among Internet users in connection with political events and mobilizations in recent years in Spain revolved largely around manifestations of support or opposition, rather than concrete political action. Hoffman et al. (2010) conducted a series of surveys to determine people’s motivation to engage in politics online, which revealed that the majority of respondents saw the Internet as a discursive medium, rather than as a way of becoming involved in ‘real’ collective action or shaping policymaking. In their conclusions, these authors argue that their results are pointing to ‘a breed of political engagement in which the benefits are found in the performance of the act itself, rather than in the outcome or effects of that act (influencing government)’ (Hoffman et al., 2010: 20).

Beyond explorations of the actual function and purpose fulfilled by online public spheres, another concern attracting research on the intersection of these spaces and ICTs in recent years has to do with the global/local dynamics they reveal (Fenton, 2008). According to Castells (2008), important structural changes worldwide have fostered the emergence of a global public sphere where local issues get disseminated and re-dimensioned as global ones, in the context of a highly interdependent world.

…There is a shift from a public sphere anchored around the national institutions of territorially bound societies to a public sphere constituted around the media system … This media system includes what I have conceptualized as mass self-communication, that is, networks of communication that relate many-to-many in the sending and receiving of messages in a multimodal form of communication that bypasses mass media and often escapes government control. (Castells, 2008: 88)

We argue that Generation Y reflects the characteristics of the discursive (i.e. more expressive than deliberative) public sphere that Dahlgren (2005), Hoffman et al. (2010), López García (2006) and Resina de la Fuente (2010) have identified in previous studies on political deliberation on the Internet. This can be corroborated through results from our content analysis showing, as we will explain later, that participation from followers of the blog is limited to comments on Yoani Sánchez’s posts, with little dialogue or debate among themselves. Moreover, we contend that, despite its lack of many-to-many interactions, Generation Y provides a space for exchanges on Cuban politics and other issues of public concern in that country, which is relatively open to people outside and inside it as well as relatively free of governmental control. In other words, Generation Y represents one thriving instance in the constellation of communicative spaces that constitute the global public sphere, as defined by Castells (2008).

The facilitation of a discursive, transnational public sphere through ICTs such as that exemplified by Generation Y in the context of a closed media system like the Cuban one
does not mean that the environment provided by these technologies ensures, by itself, a
democratic exercise of citizenship. However, in the case of Cuba, and despite the difficul-
ties in accessing the Internet, gaps in terms of media literacy, and scarce experience in
political dialogue, digital networks have led to the establishment of a meeting place for
different sectors of civil society, located both inside and outside the country.

**Posts and participation in Generation Y**

According to Alexa.com (2013), the portal, DesdeCuba.com, within which lies
Generation Y, is at position 81,950 in terms of overall traffic. This puts the portal ahead
of Cubaencuentro, one of the most visible spaces for political content in connection with
Cuba in recent times, now in evident decline, which is ranked at position 146,753.

Around some 15 monthly entries are published in the blog. Between 1 July 2009 and
30 June 2010, Yoani Sánchez made a total of 177 posts. From a content analysis of these
posts and the responses they generated from readers, we identified nine general catego-
ries of themes addressed by Generation Y. In the same period, the most popular ones
were: society, politics, suppression of civil rights, and economy.

Categories were first established by describing the central ideas or main themes cov-
ered by the posts. Then, all the texts were labelled by redefining their subjects into a
more general classification, grouping posts according to related discursive issues. Thus,
the ‘civil rights coercion’ category includes texts about repressive police actions against
citizens such as illegal surveillance, travelling bans and government attacks on free
speech; the ‘Cuban blogger community’ category deals with activities performed by
bloggers inside the island; the ‘culture’ category refers not only to art and entertainment
posts, but also to Cuban cultural policies; the ‘internal opposition’ category takes into
consideration the reported dynamics of domestic civil organizations standing against the
government; the ‘economy’ category includes economic policies, corruption disclosures,
private market initiatives and their consequences, together with shortages and daily dif-
ficulties in household finances; the ‘education’ category comprises debates on the situa-
tion of schools and universities across the country; the ‘media’ category includes specific
comments on national film or television production, Cuban press performance and media
censorship; the ‘politics’ category considers public opinion issues, discussions around
the need for democratic change, election processes, political participation in Cuba,
among other things; and, finally, the ‘society’ category has to do with discourse on moral
and behavioural changes in the Cuban people, racism, prostitution, and related topics,
with a general anthropological scope.

The process of coding postings was performed by a single coder to minimize potential
problems in connection with inter-coder reliability, although the accuracy of the classifi-
cation of texts was previously tested on 10 per cent of the posts. Of course, many of the
topics’ definitions are related. In fact, some of them, such as ‘politics’, are directly or
indirectly connected with the other themes in the blog, meaning that ‘society’ also con-
nects in a way with the ‘politics’ category and public opinion issues. Nevertheless, meth-
odologically, posts that could be classified under more than one subject were counted
just once for the most relevant category.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the distribution and percentages of themes in Sánchez’s
postings, by month.
Table 1. Distribution of subjects in monthly posts on Generation Y between July 2009 and June 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months</th>
<th>Civil rights coercion</th>
<th>Cuban blogger community</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Internal opposition</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Society</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 2009</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 2009</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.
Some issues diminished in importance and practically disappeared from the agenda of the site in 2010, such as those related to the Cuban online community and efforts by Sánchez and other collaborators to strengthen it through the creation of a network of informal training facilities for aspiring bloggers, as well as through special awards to recognize the efforts of new members. On the other hand, other themes, such as matters related to the media, their presence on the island, media censorship practices and the strategies adopted by citizens to avoid them, have been on the rise since January 2010. Apart from these occasional fluctuations, the ‘politics’ and ‘society’ categories remain the most popular for posts in Generation Y.

Regarding social issues, the loss of civic values and the need for an unrestricted dialogue among all Cubans, both inside and outside the country, are stressed. Not surprisingly, the period we chose for our content analysis was marked by events such as a public debate with international repercussions in the Spanish-speaking world between pro-revolution musician Silvio Rodriguez and journalist Carlos Alberto Montaner. The debate involved two renowned Cubans, each situated on the opposite ideological extreme from the other, a fact that Sánchez herself celebrated in a post to that effect as a triumph on the route to national reconciliation.

The way politics is commented on is always critical towards the status quo, a stance that is also accentuated throughout the other themes of the posts on the blog. In fact, politics appears as the underlying connective tissue throughout all the content of Generation Y. Local elections in the country, speeches by Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders, the talks between the government and the Catholic Church, the visit of foreign leaders, domestic reforms and policies, the 2010 congress of the Communist Youth League (3–4 April) and the postponement of the Communist Party’s congress, finally held during 14–19 April 2011, are among the recurrent issues for reflection by the blogger.

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**Figure 1.** Generacion Y posting issues in % (July 2009–July 2010) N = 177.

*Source: Authors’ own elaboration.*
Social and economic questions related to the failure of Cuban production models find, on many occasions, an undeniable political parallelism within the blog. A similar phenomenon happens with topics related to arts and entertainment (‘culture’). For instance, a political controversy resulted from a concert which featured the Colombian singer, Juanes, and other artists in Havana in September 2009 and which was strongly opposed by an important part of the Cuban community in Miami. Sanchez’s response in support of the concert was deeply political as well. This stance was consistent with her position of establishing bridges as premises for a possible consensual, democratic solution to the national crisis.

Political issues in the blog are also very much tied to the suppression of civil rights, including the right to travel freely, consistently denied by the authorities to the blogger. The subject of internal dissidence also receives some attention, especially through the coverage of current topics such as the death of political prisoner Orlando Zapata, and the hunger strike of the opposition advocate, Guillermo Fariñas. However, general posts dedicated to the internal dissidence movement are rare in comparison to the attention given to other matters of civil rights suppression.

Although the support of Sanchez for some leaders, like Guillermo Fariñas, has become more visible in recent times, she has always maintained a certain distance with regard to Cuban opposition groups, avoiding committing to any of them. This fact may help explain the scarcity of entries dedicated to issues of domestic dissidence in the blog. Yet, the increasing international recognition achieved by Generation Y has also attracted the attention of the Cuban government. The blog’s growing audience worldwide has, in turn, elicited internal reactions, which, if not directly instigated by the government, are condoned by the local authorities, such as demonstrations against Yoani Sanchez and her husband, Reinaldo Escobar, which, paradoxically, have drawn growing dissident political activism to the blog.

Most of the comments from Generation Y’s followers respond to political postings by Sanchez. As mentioned before, in November 2009, Yoani Sanchez achieved the unthinkable for a private Cuban blogger: an interview with US President Barack Obama. During that month, political entries constituted 50 per cent of the blog’s posts and that is also when the highest amount of feedback by followers was achieved during the 12-month period studied (Figure 2). Moreover, this was also the month when demonstrations against Sanchez’s husband Reinaldo Escobar by the Cuban government’s supporters and indiscriminate arrests of Sanchez intensified the most. All these events were reflected by Sanchez in her blog.

Followers’ involvement in Generation Y is limited to comments in response to each blog entry. These comments by visitors serve mostly to complement (by means of support, reinterpretation or contradiction) the meaning of Sanchez’s posts. Besides this asynchronous one-to-many option, it is now possible for almost anyone to also experience one-on-one exchanges with the blogger through her personal Twitter account. This was, during the period studied, a fairly recent addition to Sanchez’s blogging activity, which has facilitated not only the expansion of a community of followers for the Generation Y project, with significant implications in terms of Cuban politics and media, but access to the blogger’s experiences and ideas in almost real time. The use of micro blogging in Generation Y has also served as a tool for the blogger to denounce arrests and other repressive actions by the Cuban authorities, including those directly affecting Sanchez herself on many occasions.
With Twitter, Sánchez has gotten much more active in politics, expanding her reach to other platforms, such as cell phones. However, Twitter’s interactive capabilities fall short of opening opportunities for real and substantial dialogue between Sánchez and her followers, which could lead to enrichment of the topics addressed in her blog, mostly because of Twitter’s restrictions on post lengths (140 characters). By summer 2010, Sánchez had 54,683 followers on Twitter and she, in turn, followed 1113 accounts in that network, publishing in it an average of five times a day. One year later, she had 149,004 followers and was, in turn, following 80,295 accounts. In April 2013, she had 473,747 followers, and was following 86,432 accounts.

Twitter has become, in fact, a fundamental element of the communication strategy of Generation Y. Sánchez herself has dedicated more than a few posts to point out the contributions of this service in overcoming the current information access difficulties in Cuba, especially for someone like her, contrary to the status quo and actively in favour of its transformation. Therefore, in addition to expanding Generation Y’s content transmission capabilities, Twitter has multiplied its reception among followers.

In July 2010, another tool that enabled public access to this blog was Networked Blogs, which made it possible then for some 556 users to follow updates on Generation Y through their Facebook profiles. In July 2011, Generation Y was using the ‘Share’ button below each post, which allows the sharing of texts through a wide range of sites, such as Blogger, MySpace, Digg and, of course, Facebook and Twitter. Both social networks, Facebook and Twitter, serve to support the community of followers of Generation Y inside and outside the island. Also, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) subscriptions and email updates are available to anyone interested, as additional ways for the dissemination of the blog’s content.

YouTube was the most popular vehicle for audiovisual blog entries (substantially less recurrent than textual ones). Only in one among 177 posts in 12 months was Flickr used.

![Figure 2. Users’ comments in Generation Y vs months (%), N = 371,476.](image)
*Source: Authors’ own elaboration. (Numbers in parentheses reflect total number of posts by visitors per month.)*
to share photos. Nevertheless, many of the posts are accompanied by images, usually signed by Sánchez’s collaborator, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo.

From the analysis of the structure of the blog’s core content, where visitors’ participation is limited to linear responses to the blogger’s posts or to other visitors’ replies, it is clear that the site offers closed possibilities to debate under the gaze of one or more facilitators that serve more as censors than as mediators (Figure 3).

Original user-generated content is, thus, dismissed in this blog and there is a high degree of ‘inbreeding’ in the proposal of subjects for commentary in the sense that new turns and perspectives in connection to a determined topic always involve referencing focal points initially suggested by Sánchez. Responses to visitors’ comments at Generation Y play a role in the reflections posted by Sanchez, but visitors are not involved in deciding the subjects for her posts. Exchanges among the blog’s visitors, led by the blogger’s entries, have no obvious impact on the blog’s core production.

A deeper look into the blog’s interactional dynamics reveals that visitors occasionally contribute responses on entries that are quite old, except in threads that have been closed by the decision of the site’s administrator. Despite this option, visitors to the blog tend to focus on recent posts when making their comments.

Users cannot initiate new threads for dialogue and have a reduced ability to open up new topics for discussion – in fact, very few do it even in their comments. Thus, in so far as the propositional level of the visitors is low, and the referential level of their discourses is high, communication within Generation Y shows asymmetrical characteristics that favour more reactive expression than real debate between Sánchez and the blog’s followers, and among those users themselves.

In that sense, there is a tacit acceptance among the visitors of the limited and relatively passive conditions for participation they get in Generation Y, as is the case in so many other blogs and certainly in most mainstream digital media. For the same reason, most of the content generated by followers of the blog is not highly elaborated. In fact, a number of replies that followers contribute immediately after each new post by Sánchez are closer to rants and raves than to logical arguments on the subject.

A few users, however, articulate more carefully their comments, linking their replies to relevant websites in order to contribute additional information and support their points of view more effectively. These particular users are also highly committed to the dissemination of Generation Y’s content and often replicate it on their own sites. They also carry out actions aimed at promoting the blog. In general, these cases reveal a strong ideological alignment with Generation Y’s agenda and its author, as illustrated in Figure 4.

The referential nature of the majority of users’ contributions is not just related to Sánchez’s postings, which are the main element enabling opinions, but also to replies by other visitors. These expressions of mutual referencing demonstrate the existence of a community of followers of the blog whose motivation to participate goes beyond merely commenting on the post of the moment, to also get exposure to, and possibly engage with, other Internet users.

Generation Y’s followers, therefore, participate frequently in the forums enabled by each of Sánchez’s blog entries not only to comment on newly published texts, but to leave personal notes that often continue previous interventions. Interestingly, there seems to be competition among the users to be the first to comment on a new input, to rebut or
Junio 23rd, 2010 en 21:10

BORRADO POR OFENSIVO

Comentarista —j—c:

“Tarjeta roja” para Ud.

Si insiste en su actitud de ofender y molestar a los otros comentaristas, será excluido del debate.

El moderador.

‘June 23rd, 2010, 21:10

DELETED BECAUSE OF OFFENSIVE CONTENT

Commentator —j—c:

“Red card” for you.

If you insist in your attitude of offending and disturbing other commentators, you’ll be excluded from the debate.

‘The moderator.’

Note: Moderator’s ban was deleted from the site at some point between July 2010 and July 2011, so now we have only the following comment to remind us of what happened.

Junio 23rd, 2010 en 21:27

pero que estupidez es esta de tarjeta roja? jajajajaj pero tu donde te crees que estas? por eso es que ustedes no avanzan por eso que aqui no se puede respetar respetar a quien? si son ustedes los primeros en descalificar a cuanto cristiano aparece por aqui con una opinion distinta de que tarjeta roja tu me hablas? jajajajaj tarjeta roja ni tarjeta roja eso es infantil compadre una pila de hombres y mujeres hablando aqui pa que tu salgas todo patiado no esto es tarjeta roja jajajaj bueno viejo borrarme yo digo mi verdad como mismo la dicen ustedes lo que pasa que la mia no te cuadra parece que es mas verdad que la tuya.

‘June 23rd, 2010, 21:27

what stupidity is this red card? hahahahaha where do you think you are? that’s why you don’t advance ’cause here you cannot respect, respect who? You are the first to disqualify anyone who appears here with a different opinion, which red card are you talking about? hahahahaha, to say red card is childish, dude, there are a lot of men and women talking here and you say red card hahahah well dude, erase me, I’m telling the truth as you say yours but mine is not right for you, it appears to be more truth than yours.’

Figure 3. Example of moderator’s intervention at Generation Y.

Estimados comentaristas:

1. Pregunta un participante

“MODERADOR!!! Hay alguna manera de confirmar que estamos comprando T-shirts que soportan (van para) beneficio del blog Generacion ?”

Respuesta: La venta de pulóveres con el logo de GY es un proyecto personal de un comentarista del blog. El equipo de moderadores y colaboradores de Yoani saluda la iniciativa porque ayuda a promover la visibilidad de este espacio, pero es totalmente ajeno a ella.

2. Sobre la utilización de ciertos nicks

Todas las medidas referentes a las “Normas para comentar”, son consultadas siempre con Yoani Sánchez. Es algo convenido mutuamente. Por esa razón, le hemos enviado un mensaje con las inquietudes de algunos comentaristas respecto al uso de ciertos nicks inapropiados, para incluir este elemento en las normas. Las respuestas de Yoani a nuestras consultas no son inmediatas y dependen de sus posibilidades de conexión. Sepan los asiduos de GY que encontramos perfectamente razonables las preocupaciones expresadas aquí en relación con este asunto.

‘Moderators
January 30th, 2010, 18:28

Dear commentators:

1. A participant asks:

“MODERATOR!!! Is there any way of confirming that we’re buying T-shirts that support (goes to) Generation blog’s benefit?”

Answer: Sale of pullovers with the GY logo is a personal project by one commentator of this blog. Yoani’s team of moderators and collaborators salutes this initiative because it helps promoting this space’s visibility, but it’s not related at all with the sale.

2. About the use of certain nicknames:

All policies related to “Rules for commenting” are always consulted with Yoani Sánchez. They’re mutually agreed upon. Therefore, we have sent her a message with some commentators’ concerns with respect the use of certain inappropriate nicks, in order to regulate this aspect. Yoani’s answers to our questions are not immediately issued and depend on her possibilities to connect [to the Internet]. Followers of GY are assured that we find their concerns expressed here regarding this matter to be perfectly reasonable.’

Figure 4. Example of moderator’s intervention at Generation Y.
complete the ideas of others, in an effort to achieve a social recognition that begins with the users’ self-selection of their respective identity attributes as participants in this space. This social recognition is dependent on a militant ideology that, in the case of persons who aspire to become regulars in the forums of Generation Y, represents almost a prerequisite. The users’ insistence on flaunting their political positions mediates the dialogue, but, rather than facilitating it, such mediation hinders it. The comments inserted by users tend to complete others’ interpretation of a post, but from a political reading that is rarely informed by an attempt to generate dialogue and reconciliation.

**Users’ construction of online identities**

Users begin building their virtual identities in Generation Y from two basic elements: their online name and their avatar. These elements emerge from the technical conditions (i.e. registration process) set by the blog for the posting of comments.

When visitors enter an opinion concerning a specific post, their username and email ID are requested, but only the former is revealed to the public; the latter usually remains hidden to everyone except the blog’s administrators. Users may also enter information about their own web pages – if they have any – but this is not required to publish comments on the blog.

While avatars may or may not be randomly assigned, usernames are purposively selected by the blog’s followers. Indeed, usernames frequently assert users’ positions and world-views from the start (e.g. Comunista Hasta La Muerte [Communist til Death]). Consequently, many of the comments made by users in connection to posts on the blog are politically consistent with their choice of usernames. This fact supposes not only a predetermined ideological load for most users’ identities, but a pre-organizing element (i.e. likelihood of support or opposition) in the constitution of exchanges with other participants around any topic proposed in the blog.

Still, identities adopted by users in the blog can take many forms, although it is possible to identify at least five major categories (see examples in Table 2):

- **Identities of provocation/complaint**: They hold humorous or mocking image-text associations. Often appearing to ridicule, they seek to make other users uncomfortable. Conflict is the main feature of these identities.
- **Identities of conciliation**: They appeal to middle ground stances and invoke consensus. They usually advocate for peace and freedom as inalienable universal rights. They also avoid conflict and, in some cases, openly oppose it.
- **Ambiguous or dissonant identities**: They present a contradiction between image and text that immediately draws attention for their absurdity. Their ambivalence is also observed at a discursive level, generating a high degree of polysemy. In most cases, the dissonance is intentional and seeks to reinforce the ideological bias of the user. Thus, a username such as En Defensa De La Revolución (In Defence of the Revolution) guarantees multiple readings when it becomes clear that the revolution to which the owner of this username is referring is not the revolution in power, but one expected to overthrow the established government in Cuba.
Table 2. Examples illustrating categories of online identities in Generation Y.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User’s identity</th>
<th>Username 1</th>
<th>Avatar 1</th>
<th>Username 2</th>
<th>Avatar 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identities of provocation/complaint</td>
<td>Judascastro</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tampico-Castros-Asesinos-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cubano47</td>
<td></td>
<td>LLA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identities of conciliation</td>
<td>Danilo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Web 2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous or discordant identities</td>
<td>Comunista Hasta la Muerte</td>
<td></td>
<td>Iyamiami</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmogonic identities</td>
<td>Clara Angel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Delfino Castro Monroy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cubano 100%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubano-American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cerro → Libertad a Todos los Presos</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sinpatria Perosinamo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Políticos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aserro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custom-tailored identities</td>
<td>Tusacutusa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Calabacita Exiliada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angelic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armienne</td>
<td></td>
<td>El Inagotable Orlando</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gusanita</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leon de Miami00A0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.
• **Cosmogonic identities**: These are anchored in Cuban national symbols or in those from other countries related to the user’s nationality or place of residence. National flags, religious images, even local Cuban flora, such as the royal palm, are used along with names descriptive of regions of the island or close to Cuban popular culture. These identities are infused with nostalgia and seek to capture features of a national project close to Cuban historical roots.

• **Custom-tailored identities**: These adopt proprietary names, household elements from media culture such as cartoons or movie characters, well-known symbols or images designed/generated by the users themselves.

Although rules for posting on the blog explicitly prohibit usernames that distort the names of public personalities in ways that may be considered disrespectful (to the extent that the blog’s administrator may delete users who violate this condition), it is evident that enforcement of this restriction is extremely lenient in the case of direct attacks against Fidel or Raul Castro. Thus, within Generation Y, it is possible to find quite active users under nicknames such as Judascastro, Castrucciocastracani, Tampico-castros-asesinos-, Castra Castro and Castrofobia. This fact offers a less than subtle hint of the implicit editorial line of the blog.

As mentioned before, users sometimes link their names to personal web pages when publishing comments on Generation Y. This offers some possibility of interaction between visitors to those personal pages and Sánchez, as well as with the commentators on the blog. But linking to external web pages also functions as a marker of identity for those web-savvy users who engage in this practice. For instance, the URLs of websites associated with some usernames are unequivocal about their owners’ political stance regarding Cuba, as evidenced by cases such as http://www.cubarepresionycensura.blogspot.co.uk/ and http://www.cubanosincensura.blogspot.co.uk/.

Usernames and images attached to the online identities of Generation Y’s followers usually remain unaltered over time, changing only to include a specific statement or ideological assertion during the development of a particular event, as in the case of the user originally known as Cerro (Hill), which temporarily became Cerro –> Libertad a Todos los Presos Políticos (Hill –> freedom for all political prisoners), in 2009. These statements are made by users by clearly separating their original username from the attached new sentence, although, sometimes, the resulting composite phrase becomes a permanent constitutive element of the user’s identity (e.g. Matapiojos/Cero Remesas/Cero Viajes/Cero Cooperación [Lice-killer/Zero Remittances/Zero Travels/Zero Cooperation]).

The maintenance of a stable identity through blog entries over time responds to users’ need for ensuring a continued and recognized presence in a space as dynamic as Generation Y, which averages more than 2000 users’ comments per post.

**Generation Y and discursive constructions of the Cuban political situation**

Generation Y revolves around the communication of everyday life events in Cuba, which includes the blog maintaining a consistent strategy of activism against the Cuban
government. The political purposes of the site, although not explicitly presented or spelt out in the blog’s ‘About’ section, constitute the core around which Sánchez and her followers articulate their textual production. However, more than a space for dialogue among citizens with a stake in Cuba’s reality, Generation Y represents an outlet for critical opposition to the status quo prevailing on the island.

Still, the existence of Generation Y, in itself, proves the emergence of a national civil society located outside the control of the ruling Communist Party in Cuba, with a growing capacity for dissemination and reach, thanks to capabilities supported by new ICTs. The site also evidences in its forums the ideological fragmentation of a citizenry subjected to the complexities of a historical process of the magnitude of the Cuban revolution.

This same national citizenry is geographically dispersed and not necessarily determined by its residence on a common territory due to the emigration of scores of Cubans during the last few decades. The latter is an important element considered in our analysis: inside-outside dynamics permeate this blog – a blog that chronicles its author’s residence in the country, but targets an audience mostly located outside it because of internal restrictions to Internet access and censorship by the Cuban government.

Users express their political concerns even when commenting on entries devoted by Sánchez to other issues such as culture, economy or society. Participants’ discourse in the blog is, therefore, generally contentious and militant, and seeks to highlight the need for structural change in Cuba. However, this consensually acknowledged need is approached from a diversity of stances that seem irreconcilable, not only because of their mutual antagonism, but also because of the apparent lack of desire for tolerance and harmony that prevails in the blog’s interactions.

On several occasions, Sánchez herself has stressed the importance of civilized dialogue to find concerted solutions for Cuba: solutions that pass through inclusion of all social groups and overcoming the generational, economic, geographic and, above all, political divisions prevailing in the country for decades. Moreover, Sánchez has also argued that openness to different points of view on the same subject has the potential of enriching rational debate and enables participants in the exercise of an activity in which many Cubans have had little experience: the exchange of ideas through respect and acceptance of a plurality of perspectives.

However, links recommended in the blog belong mostly to sites ideologically aligned with the political views of Generation Y’s blogger, although Sánchez has occasionally tried to reach out to bloggers who are sympathetic to the Cuban government. In other words, not even Generation Y seems able to practise what it preaches regarding tolerance and plurality in its forums, probably because some social actors that should participate in them, including bloggers from a more diverse ideological spectrum, are not actually considered legitimate interlocutors.

While followers of Generation Y coincide on a mostly critical position with regard to the Cuban government, their discourse in comments and replies to posts reveal conflictive constructions of the political situation in that country. Opinion exchanges among users of the blog are generally antagonistic and rarely does any response subscribe to the views of any other participant. The language used by users is passionate, with frequent appeals to vulgarity, disqualifications and jeers.
We identified three different ways in which discourses by participants in Generation Y represent the current Cuban political situation: inclusive, centre-conciliatory and extremist-dissident.

Inclusive representation users see the positive elements contributed by the Cuban revolution as a historical process, but they are also critical of the status quo and seek moderate political reform. They oppose a possible return of liberal capitalism and Cuban dependence on foreign powers, especially the United States, as these accounts contend existed before the Revolution of 1959. These representations also consider disproportionate and inaccurate most open attacks against the Cuban government, which are usually dismissed as uprooted constructions and propaganda by people abroad who do not really know the reality of the island.8

Sometimes, users who engage in this kind of representation also attack Sánchez’s credentials as a blogger by accusing her of being a mercenary at the service of Cuban expatriates or foreign governments. An example of this can be seen on the blog, http://web.archive.org/web/20100408135309/http://www.latigocubano.net/, maintained by a visitor at Generation Y.9 Finally, these representations frequently appeal to the territorial uprooting argument to downplay the opinions of users living outside the island.

Centre-conciliatory discourses, on the other hand, propose a profound overhaul of political practices inside Cuba, starting with a rejection of extreme positions either in favour of or against the ruling regime. They denounce irrational debate and support a political model of social inclusion to protect the most disadvantaged people in a scenario of political transition. This kind of discourse is based on a utopian understanding of national pre-revolutionary history, calling for a return to the allegedly prosperous past before Fidel Castro’s ascent to power, but also recognizing the need to support some of the achievements of the revolution.10

Extremist-dissident representations constitute the majority of postings by Generation Y’s visitors. They disqualify participants that formulate integrative representations of the current political situation in Cuba. They also assume that it is not possible to negotiate any political change with the Cuban regime and that respect for civil rights should be unconditional. These users call for a radical change of the status quo involving the establishment of a free market economy and a multiparty political system, excluding, however, Communists who have links to the current government.11

Readings of Generation Y’s content by participants in the latter discursive category always end up interpreting the blog’s posts as evidence that supports their political demands, regardless of whether the connection between the two is apparent or not. Even some seemingly ‘neutral’ topics addressed in the blog, such as sports, draw political commentary from those embracing extremist-dissident constructions about Cuba. They use the blog entries as a platform to discredit Cuban government leaders. In general, they defend the blog’s critical editorial line, although individuals from this group of users have, on occasion, shown their dissatisfaction with some of Sánchez’s positions (e.g. when she supported travel authorizations for Americans who want to go to the island). Thus, the extremists do not assume a more flexible stance in pursuit of negotiated solutions to national problems, not even when the blogger herself adopts conciliatory discourses.

Overall, exchanges in Generation Y reflect limited competences in relation to its users’ ability to engage in the rational, civil and productive debate of ideas modelled by
traditional conceptualizations of the public sphere. Most participants contribute comments that either point out the obvious limitations of an impoverished country facing too many external and internal obstacles for its development or reiterate old demands for greater human and political rights for Cubans. However, almost none of the participants in the blog goes beyond these recurrent arguments to propose viable solutions to obvious problems or reflect on the duties and responsibilities that the practice of civil and political rights entails.

Conclusions

The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that among the main reasons for bloggers to publish online, an important one was motivating people for action (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). While the geographical dispersion of the followers of Generation Y makes it difficult for the blog to promote mobilization that can directly impact politics in Cuba, it has been able to provide a space for exchange of opinions and comments on different aspects of the daily life of that country. This new space, facilitated by digital ICTs, represents an alternative to the constraints of communication outlets traditionally dominated by the Cuban government and radical dissidents, both inside and outside the island.

The site, named after a generation marked by disenchantment with respect to the Cuban revolution, presents an opportunity for a significant part of the Cubans inside and outside the country to come together and outline the rules of engagement for a civil society that has been deprived for decades of horizontal, non-mediated mechanisms of decision making – a task naturally fraught with tensions and challenges. It is at the civil society level, rather than at the state one, that the question of hegemony is being settled in these times of global, non-hierarchical networking (Castells, 2008). Blogs in the Cuban context, although hardly accessible, constitute one of those environments for hegemony reproduction and contestation within a society that tries to regain agency against the power of the status quo.

As our case study has shown, Generation Y possesses, like many other online forums, the characteristics of an expressive public sphere (Hoffman et al., 2010; López García, 2006; Resina de la Fuente, 2010), rather than of a deliberative one. That is, posts by Sánchez and the blog’s visitors reflect discursive constructions of Cuba’s reality, which frequently contradict one another and rarely lead to consensus building in the way that traditional conceptualizations of the public sphere would have it. The chronicling of everyday life on the island by Sánchez, and the mostly visceral responses she gets from the blog’s followers, illustrates Dahlgren’s (2000, 2005) claim about the large extent to which subjective dispositions, identities and lived experiences inform both people’s participation in political interaction and their choices in how to articulate that participation.

Generation Y provides an exchange space where confrontation prevails over rational debate. This make us wonder at the value of a reactive type of participation that fails to find common ground among disparate positions precisely because of the unwillingness of many of the blog’s users to accept the differences in their interlocutors’ way of assuming criticism of the Cuban government. Nevertheless, according to Mouffe (1999) and Dahlberg (2007), conflict is inevitable in the interaction of individuals and social groups
with different agendas and degrees of power in a society. This is especially true in the case of Cuba, where highly polarized ideological lines dividing the ‘us’ from the ‘them’ have been purposively emphasized for decades, thus contributing to the widespread fragmentation that Cuban civil society still suffers today.

The expressivity manifested at Generation Y is not limited to the texts of the visitors’ comments, but extends to the constructions of the visitors’ online identities, which generally seek to assert strong ideological stances through eloquent usernames and avatars, even before interactions take place within the blog. In this sense, participants in this space corroborate Dahlgren’s (2005) argument that political communication is anchored in individuals’ subjectivity and support Mouffe’s (1999) argument that passions, antagonisms and exclusions (what she terms ‘agonistic pluralism’), rather than inclusive rational consensus building, underlie contemporary public spheres.

Future explorations on the subject of online public spheres could inquire into the ‘processual value’ that Dahlgren (2005) finds in the practice itself of political (and sometimes non- or pre-political) communication facilitated by ICTs, especially to determine the extent of existing empirical support for his claim that these exchanges eventually lead to social movements and formalized politics. Challenges in this regard in the Cuban context emerge not only because of unequal access to technology and important differences in media literacy between Cubans inside and outside the country (which Sánchez has tried to ameliorate through her blogger academy and even several of her posts), but also because of Cuban civil society’s lack of experience in democratic dialogue and mediation of difference.

If we follow Fenton’s (2008) argument that a viable political community should move beyond a postmodern acceptance of difference to find ways of effectively articulating competing visions and identities, then it would be worth studying whether Generation Y evolves as a community in future years to grant a more central role to users in both the definition of the blog’s discussion subjects and the exercise of mediating roles aiming at productively channelling ideological diversity.

In its current form and despite its limitations, we find, however, that Generation Y has value as a relatively plural space to vent and confront some of the deepest challenges faced by Cuban civil society. In a local media environment marked by stagnation and closure, the site opens the doors to an unprecedented domestic/global exchange with the potential of promoting practices of participation and deliberation currently denied by the country’s institutional communication system.

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**Notes**

1 By 9 February 2011, the submarine telecommunications cable laid by Venezuela had reached the Cuban shore of Siboney. According to a former high ranking employee of InterTel, a telecommunications company affiliated to the Cuban importing/exporting corporation, CIMEX, by 15 February 2012, there were already 1100 kilometres of fibre optic cable installed on the island, including the backbone of the new high-speed network, but access to such a network.
was, in his opinion, still strictly controlled by the government for political reasons. The Cuban government, on the other hand, argues that delays in the opening of the network to the public are due to limitations with the domestic telecommunications infrastructure, which are blamed on the commercial blockade imposed on Cuba by the US (Alfonso, 2012).

On 30 March 2010, Silvio Rodríguez, the famous Cuban Revolution songwriter and singer, published a poem on Kaosenlared.net and Rebelion.org, with a rhetorical question addressed to Carlos Alberto Montaner, a Cuban exiled writer and journalist. Montaner answered Silvio in a public letter through the Internet, which generated a hard ideological debate between them that lasted until 14 April 2010. The Cuban Communist Party official newspaper, Granma, contributed to the exchange by indirectly attacking Silvio Rodríguez with a caricature, which, however, was withdrawn from its site within 24 hours.

After the Cuban government gave its permission during summer 2010 to celebrate the concert proposed by Juanes, under the generic title ‘Peace without Borders’, numerous demonstrations and debates took place in Miami and other parts of the world, with positions both in favour of and against the event. Many argued that Juanes and the other artists involved in the organization of the concert were indirectly supporting the Cuban revolution, not democracy or liberty as they stated. Cuban musicians exiled in the US, such as Gloria Estefan and Willy Chirino, demanded to participate in the presentation without any restriction on free speech, along with the international artists that Juanes had originally invited. However, did not allow them to travel to the island. Although in jeopardy until the last minute due to some misunderstandings between the Cuban authorities and the organizers, the concert finally took place on 20 September 2010 and enjoyed tremendous success, mainly among Cuba’s youth.

Restrictions to travel outside the island were formally lifted by the Cuban government on 14 January 2013.

On 23 February 2010, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, a Cuban political prisoner, recognized as such since 2004 by Amnesty International, died after 85 days of hunger strike. Zapata was imprisoned in 2003 along with a large group of 75 human rights activists, independent journalists and other opponents of the Cuban government. Although the Cuban government declared, with the support of several heads of state from around the world, among them Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Juan Evo Morales Ayma of Bolivia, that Zapata was a common criminal, many international authorities and personalities denounced his death, which strengthened the opposition inside the island.

Guillermo Fariñas is a Cuban political dissident who received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament in 2010, after the hunger strike he held to protest the death of dissident Orlando Zapata. He demanded the release of 26 political prisoners seriously ill in Cuban jails. He abandoned his hunger strike, close to death, when the Cuban government, in coordination with Cuban Catholic church and the Spanish government, decided to set free 52 political prisoners, many of whom were advised to leave the island without any possibility of returning.

The opposite phenomenon (i.e. pro-Cuban government bloggers delegitimizing Yoani Sánchez and critics of the revolution as interlocutors) is also true.

An example to illustrate this stance (translated from the original text in Spanish): ‘In Cuba, an ample segment of the population has culture, education, knowledge, etc. Regardless of systematic indoctrination, these people are capable of having a mind of their own. I assure you they have a critical spirit, as well as the ability to judge what’s right and what’s wrong. The fact that there are no ideal conditions for public discussion and debate is another matter – and even despite that, some debate happens. It’s false that the Cuban people are “forced” to attend public demonstrations [in favour of the Revolution], or that it is silent …’ (Reply by ‘Henry’

9 An example to illustrate this stance (translated from the original text in Spanish): ‘Yoani Sánchez is only interested in herself. She wants to leave Switzerland [a figurative way of referring to Cuba], thus denying her own son the benefits of one of the most developed countries and with better living standards in the world, as she admits. From the start, she has been the chronicler of Cuban everyday life, although she has participated in only one side of that life. A creation of PRISA [a Spanish media conglomerate], she builds in a few month a reputation of being a [domestic] opposition figure against the Cuban government’ (Post entitled ‘The Two Faces of Yoani Sánchez’, in the blog, ‘Látigo Cubano [Cuban Whiplash]’, on 27 March 2010: ¶ 1. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20100404055456/http://www.latigocubano.net/2010/03/1as-dos-caras-de-yoani-sanchez.html (accessed 18 January 2013).

10 An example to illustrate this stance (translated from the original text in Spanish): ‘…Yoani, you’re a genius, I trust you’ll continue using your very Cuban intellect in an independent manner; it’s really difficult trying to debate without disqualifying [one’s interlocutor], as you do. – it’s something that Cubans in the island and here in Miami refuse to understand; only through accurate criticism and avoiding hate and rancor we can begin the road towards the Cuba we want. Yoani, eres genial, confio en que seguiras usando de forma independiente tu cubanísimo intelecto, es realmente difícil tratar de polemizar sin descalificar, es algo que los cubanos de la isla y de aquí en Miami se resisten a entender, solo criticando con acierto y apagando el odio y el encono podemos comenzar a transitar el camino hacia la Cuba que queremos...’ (Reply by ‘Gaspar de Santiago’ on 19 April 2010: ¶ 10. Available at: http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?p=3211 (accessed 18 January 2013).

11 An example to illustrate this stance (translated from the original text in Spanish): ‘Carlos Alberto Montaner is an honest Cuban. Silvio [Rodríguez] is a sad/pathetic man that only has some money. I know that reconciliation and forgiveness are the right things to abide by when change [in Cuban politics] comes about, but I would never forgive Silvio. In a democratic society he’ll always be a dark human being with a negative past. Thank you’ (Reply by ‘Manolin’ on 18 April 2010: ¶ 23. Available at: http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?p=3211 (accessed 18 January 2013).

References


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