

Millennials Are Chipping Away at Communist Strongholds in Cuba

A handful of independent, web-based news outlets in Cuba are chipping away at the Communist-run island's half-century state media monopoly, challenging the official version of reality.

While low levels of internet access across the Caribbean island limits the outlets' domestic reach and they are not fully free to speak their mind, they are opening up the range of voices and sparking a debate about the role of the media in the one-party state.

"State media talks about things no one cares about and hides the truth," said Abraham Jimenez, 27, who co-launched the online, long-form magazine "El Estornudo" (The Sneeze) in March with a group of friends.

"The Sneeze was something of a reaction to this context. We want to tell the truth."

While the Cuban constitution forbids privately-owned mass media and there are no independent newspaper printing presses in the country, web-based outlets have so far been tolerated as long as they are not "counter-revolutionary", a nebulous term generally used against those the government accuses of trying to undermine it.

President Raul Castro's government blocks internet access to dissident media, such as the country's most famous blogger Yoani Sanchez, as well as stridently anti-Castro, Miami-based outlets.

The new outlets, mainly run by millennials, have distanced themselves from dissident groups. Although they are often are

highly critical of government policy and describe in detail everyday hardships, they are not calling for an end to Cuba's socialist project.

Jimenez says his grandfather worked as a guard for revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara. He does not consider himself a dissident and says his criticism is not to achieve political goals, but to present a realistic and balanced view of Cuba.

"If you never talk about a country's good things, that's also not journalism," he said.

The new openness is emblematic of a wider, albeit cautious, reform program under Raul Castro, who has allowed Cubans to purchase cellphones and laptops, installed 200 Wi-Fi hotspots across the country and even fostered a small private sector.

For some, the mere fact a debate about the role of the media is taking place is a sea change.

"In the Cuba I grew up in, that debate would never have existed," said Hugo Cancio, founder of media platform OnCuba who says he moved to the United States 35 years ago after being expelled from school for making a joke about revolutionary leader Fidel Castro.

The new tolerance may not last. The Communist Party newspaper Granma has published a series of increasingly angry attacks calling for restrictions on the new competitors, who have lured away some of its journalists by offering higher salaries and more freedom.

The critics link the new media to U.S. government financed outlets such as Miami-based opposition Radio Marti and Television Marti that seek to undermine the Cuban government.

"Cuban institutions have a legitimate right to adopt required measures in the face of tendentious journalism," the paper's

Iroel Sanchez wrote on Wednesday in a column. Sanchez called the new outlets “Trojan horses” set on attacking Cuba’s existing journalists and creating a “media aristocracy.”

The new media mavens, like the rest of Cuba’s entrepreneurs, already face tough challenges. For one, most cannot get government accreditation as journalists. Financing and logistics are also tricky.

Insiders at OnCuba, which overlooks Havana’s sweeping seafront and by describing itself as foreign media has become the only one of the new media crop to win official accreditation, say it has softened its editorial line recently in order to keep its permit.

Cuba remains one of the world’s least connected countries. Fewer than 5 percent of homes are estimated to have internet and access at Wi-Fi hotspots around town costs \$2 per hour – a hefty sum in a country where state wages average \$25 per month.

“We used to leave the office, go to a park to connect and then return,” said Robin Pedraja, 29, editor of Vistar, a digital magazine about youth culture, speaking moments before a photoshoot with an up-and-coming Cuban singer at its airy office, decorated with contemporary Cuban art and enjoying a fine views of Havana.

“Now we have a system that grabs the signal in a park and brings it to the office, although we are still paying. It’s a bit expensive but better than what we did before.”

Vistar is a glossy magazine also popular abroad – each edition is downloaded on average 50,000 times – and says it earns revenue from advertising, including Mexico’s Sol beer and Silver Airways, which serves Florida, the Bahamas and now Cuba.

Other more news-focused outlets have a smaller circulation and

are cash poor. Collaborators for “The Sneeze” work for free from home, fitting it in around their day jobs. The paper says it rejected an offer of hefty funding from a foundation.

Another publication, “Periodismo de Barrio” (Neighborhood Journalism), run by Harvard-educated 30-year old Elaine Diaz, states in its ethical code that it will not accept financing from anyone that may have been involved in “actions to destabilize Cuba”.

Most of the owners of smaller outlets say they finance them with money from other jobs or savings, and avoid foreign funding that could compromise their integrity.

Weapons of Communication

The emergence of alternative outlets has added to fuel to a smoldering debate between reformists and conservatives in the heart of Cuba’s communist system about the pace of economic and social change necessary for the system to survive.

Castro himself lambasted state-run media five years ago, complaining it was often “boring, improvised and superficial”.

“We need to leave behind the habit of triumphalism, stridency and formalism in broaching the topic of national news,” he said at the 2011 Communist Party Congress.

In a sign of the internal debate this has caused, Granma’s deputy editor, Karina Marron, made a closed-door speech in June saying nobody chose journalism to write propaganda and calling for reform. The speech was leaked on the blog of a state media journalist and went viral. The reporter was later fired.

Meanwhile, on Granma’s pages, Sanchez and others routinely attack the new outlets, which have a growing social media presence.

OnCuba, which also targets U.S. readers, has 259,616 likes on

Facebook, Vistar has 15,776, and younger and more news-based outlets like The Sneeze and Neighborhood Journalism have several thousand each.

For the time being, television remains most Cubans' main source of news, given that internet is still a luxury. Cubans tune in to the thrice-daily state news programs or to foreign satellite programs pirated from the United States.

As such, the new outlets are finding ways to reach their audience without the internet. Each edition of Vistar for example goes out as a PDF on El Paquete, a package of media distributed by USB sticks across the country.

"It won't be like the Berlin Wall coming down all at once and drastically changing perceptions," said Michaelanne Dye, a researcher who co-authored a study on internet usage in Cuba.

"Rather, through slowly increasing internet access, new, unofficial media sources, and an opening economy, pieces of the "wall" are being chipped away, bit by bit." {eo}

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