THE ROAD AHEAD:
CUBA AFTER THE JULY 11 PROTESTS

CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY | WASHINGTON, DC

From Facebook to the Streets: Digital Infrastructures and Citizen Activism In Connected Cuba

Hope Bastian, Wheaton College (Massachusetts)

Abstract: The spaces that have brought Cubans together have changed over time. In the past, *organizaciones de masas*, *bodegas* and even lines were important spaces for weaving social networks. As the channels of access to the internet have expanded and diversified, online social networks have become central to everyday life on the island for a growing group of connected Cubans. Important relationships are being made and maintained in Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats and Telegram channels and a generation often disconnected from the traditional spaces of political participation is creating new spaces of sociability to mobilize peers on and off the island around common concerns. Using new channels, they are organizing to address social problems not being resolved by the state and transforming their relationship with the State along the way.

Without a doubt, the spaces that have brought Cubans together have changed over time. In the past, *organizaciones de masas*, *bodegas* and even lines were important spaces for weaving social networks. As the channels of access to the internet have expanded and diversified, online interactions have become more important in many Cubans' everyday lives. Today relationships are being made and maintained in Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats and Telegram channels and a generation often disconnected from the traditional spaces of political participation is creating new spaces of sociability to mobilize peers on and off the island around common concerns and organizing to address social problems.

Living in Havana until mid-2021, my access to social media increased after the Fall of 2018, thanks to falling Wi-fi prices and the government's introduction of 3G and later 4G connectivity which enabled cell phones to be used for the internet. As my local contacts logged on more frequently, my Facebook newsfeed was increasingly Cuban. These digital infrastructures became a key site of social interactions among my peers as well an increasingly important field site for my research as an anthropologist[1]. Many of these contacts have access to the internet through their workplaces, but increasingly they make the investment in data plans for jobs in the non-state sector and international gig economy that require them to be online.

---

[1] I have begun to document/follow "novel uses" of mobile/internet technology, saving posts that demonstrate new interactions in "Face" space. From September 2018-April 2019, I also participated from Cuba with real-life and Facebook debates about the constitutional proposal and activist groups supporting the article 68 campaign for equality for LGBT families. A second period of research on the use of Cuban social networks took place from Cuba between October 2019 and June 2021. During this period I witnessed a more conscious use of social networks by state actors and both state and non-state actors turned to new technologies to meet the challenges of life during the COVID pandemic.

Connected Cubans

The expansion of access to the internet has given the group I call Connected Cubans access to information, but not just the ability to read foreign newspapers or triangulate the evening news reports with articles published in new independent media. Perhaps more important for the everyday lives of many during the pandemic, this connectivity has meant access to information about where to find basic foodstuffs in Havana's chronically understocked stores and created new ways to put food on the table. It is now possible to order food from state stores and on the black market to be delivered, skipping the lines and staying safe at home.

While Connected Cubans have used social media and social networks to meet their own needs during the COVID pandemic, since late 2018 new connectivity has also made it possible to engage in activism in new ways, transforming passive citizens who did not previously participate in political activities into activists, using their *megas* (megabytes) to help others. In this paper I will discuss how digital infrastructures have been harnessed by Cuban internet users as early as the Fall of 2018 to coordinate grassroots actions in Havana around issues as diverse as same-sex marriage, disaster recovery and animal rights. These campaigns provided young Cubans with the experience in organizing that made it possible for networks to rapidly reactivate in the summer of 2021 in response to the declining health situation in Matanzas and put together the pieces to attempt to understand what was going on in the country in the immediate aftermath of the protests of July 11 and internet blackouts. Later, many of the same Connected Cubans used digital infrastructures to aid and support protestors who had been detained.

Expanding Internet Access in Cuba

The first leap in expanded internet access options, which occurred through Wi-fi parks in 2015**,** changed the ways Cubans on the island communicated *with the world* through IMO, Facebook Messenger, and VOIPs. In December 2018, data services became available to prepaid Cubacel customers, reconfiguring and expanding internet access. The availability of cellular data services began to change the way Cubans communicated with others *in* Cuba, as it became common to use WhatsApp, Messenger and Facebook to communicate with friends just across town. In the first two weeks after cell phone data became available, customers of Cuba's sole telecommunications company, ETECSA, acquired more than 700,000 data packages (Reloba de la Cruz 2019, 1). Between December 6, 2018 and January 7, 2019, ETECSA sold 759,294 600 Mb packages at a cost of CUC$7)), 533,490 1 GB packages (CUC$10), 55,553 2.5 GB packages (CUC$20), and 26,444 4 GB packages (CUC$30) (Reloba de la Cruz 2019, 1). By February 2019, *Granma* reported that of the 5.4 million mobile users in Cuba, 1.87 million had already activated 3G data on their phones (Antón 2019). The same article reported that 40 percent of cellphone users were actively using a data package and that the numbers continued to grow at a rate of 5,000 new users a day (Antón 2019).

By March 2021, 5.14 million Cubans were online, 3.94 million connecting from cellphones and 1.20 million through Nauta Wi-fi and home internet accounts (Alonso Falcon et al. 2021). In a country where many households do not have landlines, communicating with WhatsApp or Facebook messenger is much cheaper than using cellphones. Even *Revolico*'s classified advertisements now tell interested buyers to contact via WhatsApp for more information. For

many Cubacel users it has become more important to have data than to have credit for calls. In the summer of 2019, a sticker reading "*Sin saldo, pero con megas*" (No call credit, no problem. But never with *megas*) printed and sold by the popular Cuban Facebook meme group *Me hackearon la cuenta* expressed the cultural consensus that it was acceptable to not have credit to make cellphone calls, but going without data was something to be avoided at all costs.

LGBT Activism in the Constitutional Reform

In February of 2019 Cuba's new constitution was approved by the National Assembly after a nationwide referendum. The first draft, available to the public in the summer of 2018, included Article 68, opening the door to marriage equality. The previous Constitution had limited marriage to heterosexual couples while the new proposal redefined marriage as "the voluntary union between two legally qualified persons in order to build a life in common" (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular 2018, 12-13). Five evangelical churches immediately began campaigning to remove Article 68. Using traditional methods for grievances in Revolutionary Cuba, they sent a letter through official channels. However, they also broke with accepted norms of dissent by placing posters against marriage equality in public spaces in the streets of Havana. Propaganda videos and materials were placed in *El Paquete* (a black market service that provides access to international television programs and films), and the Cuban Methodist Church used its Facebook page to advocate for marriage "as biblically defined". Fundamentalist churches staged public renewals of their wedding vows on the *Malecón* and collected almost 180,000 signatures "in favor of God's original design [of the family]" which they sent to the commission drafting the new constitution (Iglesia Metodista En Cuba 2018a). This activism, online and in the streets, made clear the threat that church members would vote against the Constitutional Referendum unless Article 68 was removed.

From August to November 2018, the state organized listening sessions in traditional spaces of popular participation-- workplaces, student organizations and neighborhoods -- where the proposed Constitution was examined article by article. Article 68 was one of the most discussed. I attended a workplace meeting at a University department and two neighborhood meetings. In each session multiple young people spoke out in support of retaining the article. One young woman told me that she didn't usually attend these sorts of civic meetings, but she had many friends who were gay and she had come to speak out in support of Article 68. However, her comments were not recorded as they were in support of the constitution as drafted. Only proposed changes became part of the official record of these meetings, in which nine million Cubans participated. Article 68 supporters had no formal mechanism to register their opinions in a way that would be conveyed to higher levels.

LGBT Facebook users and their allies fought back against the churches' intrusions in political life through social media. Although internet access at the time was still mostly limited to workplaces and Wi-fi parks, Facebook activists felt it was important to be present in virtual spaces since policymakers, or at least their children, were among the early adopters. A Facebook campaign under the slogan *68 Va!* asked Cubans to upload selfies to show their support.[2] Cubans in Havana, other provinces, and abroad sent photos and the page gained close to 2,000 followers.

[2] I participated in the group from its foundation. The name *68Va!* references the slogan of the 1970 Zafra "de que van van!".

Another group, *Abriendo Brechas de Colores*, released short videos telling the stories of LGBT Cubans, and calling for "All rights for all people" (Proyecto Abriendo Brechas de Colores-LGBTI 2018a, Proyecto Abriendo Brechas de Colores-LGBTI 2018b). Soon the coordinators of several pages met as an informal coalition to take their actions beyond social media. They experimented with ways to bring these digital communities into real life. With the help of employees of the trendy private sector Cuban clothing label *Clandestina* and the *Acepto* Campaign, founded in September 2017 "in favor of marriage between people of the same sex," they held several events where anyone who brought a t-shirt could have it printed with designs supporting the cause (Acepto 2019).

In mid-December the final version of the Constitution that would be brought to Referendum was released. Article 68 had been removed. On Twitter the National Assembly explained that, "the commission proposes to defer defining the concept of marriage...as a way of respecting all opinions" (Asamblea Nacional Cuba 2018). The Cuban Methodist Church understood the decision as a victory and published on Facebook, "They do this because it has been demonstrated that the majority of the population of Cuba rejected it, it shows how much the ideas of the Cuban Evangelical Church represent the Cuban people." (Iglesia Metodista En Cuba 2018b).

After the Constitution's approval, the Facebook groups continued to be active and members marched together for the first time with rainbow flags in Havana's May First workers' parade and in a spontaneous Pride march on May 11, 2019 when Mariel Castro's National Center of Sexual Education (CENESEX) cancelled its traditional Conga Against Homophobia (Reuters 2019). The May 11 march made headlines outside of Cuba when known dissidents were dragged away at the end of the march, but most people who participated gave little importance to the reports (Ruiz 2019). Many active in the campaigns for an inclusive constitution joined together to found the 11M (May 11) Telegram group, where each month they organized online activities to keep the movement alive.

On May 27, 2021 an all-female group reacting to sexism within the LGBTQ activist community launched the campaign *Ahora Sí* (AhoraSí 2021a). In a month they had 2,000 Facebook followers and organized local teams with captains on the ground in Santa Clara, Trinidad, Ciego de Avila, Cienfuegos, Bayamo, Las Tunas, Manzanillo, Guantanamo, Holguín, Santiago and Havana to pass out their flyers and stickers in the street. Their daily updates with colorful photos of their teams' work were shared by 11M activists and others on Facebook and other platforms (AhoraSí 2021b). However, the growing movement was quickly interrupted by a worsening epidemiological situation in Matanzas and the energy of many of the core activists were consumed by this new crisis and later by July 11, 2021 activities. In early September 2021, President Miguel Díaz-Canel met with members of the commission drafting the new Families Code and announced that after 22 revisions a proposal would soon be made public (Perera Robbio 2021). Following this news, several Cuban LGBTQ groups on Facebook posted that they would be reactivating their efforts.

"**Fuerza Habana": Self-help after the tornado**

During the evening of January 27, 2019 a kilometer-wide E4 tornado travelled East-Northeast across the Havana municipalities of 10 de Octubre, San Miguel de Padrón, Guanabacoa, and

Habana del Este with winds of 100s of kilometers per hour (Guevara 2019). Evening news reported four dead, 195 injured and 1,225 homes partially collapsed. Right away Connected Cubans started to organize. The timing of the tornado, between semesters, contributed to the ability of young connected Havanans to provide aid. Many committed themselves completely to the needs of the neighborhoods affected until school began the first week of February. Across transnational boundaries, friends began to fundraise to send money to Havana to buy food, water and construction materials for the affected areas.

On Facebook organizers announced collection sites for donations and pick up spots where volunteers could get rides to the area to help with cleanup efforts. Volunteers pounded the pavement, noting the addresses and detailing the needs of affected households in a Facebook group called *Alternativas* (Alternativas 2019a, Alternativas 2019b). They also used Google Maps and Docs to create collaborative lists (Cuba Tornado 2019).

Through social media, users shared information on road closings, where to park to continue on foot, and how to interface with local government authorities. They posted pictures and testimonies of their visits, confirming that they had been able to get in and distribute aid. These reassurances helped keep donations flowing from Cubans abroad who were eager to help, and wanted to see their aid go directly to those affected.

One Cuban friend living in Madrid began a crowdfunding campaign, collecting several thousand dollars before it was frozen because the funds were to go to Cuba. They also held a benefit concert and sent over CUC$600 which was distributed in cash directly to needy households identified through information posted on social networks. Socially conscious businesses in Havana pitched in to help solicit and deliver donations. A working group of community projects across the city coordinated activities to make sure that efforts would continue after most volunteers returned to school. *Akokán*, a community project in the neighborhood of *Los Pocitos* in Marianao (18 km away) committed to using their resources to organize activities for kids in different neighborhoods each Sunday.

According to my interviewees, it was social media not the state that was decisive in connecting people to those in the disaster area. “Right after the tornado social networks made it possible for us to come together to find ways we could help people who had been affected by the tornado in a way that had never been possible before. We didn’t wait for the state to help, we just went in and did whatever needed to be done,” explained one University of Havana student who spent her break responding to several initiatives she learned about on Facebook.

From Facebook to the streets: virtual spaces become real

On April 7, 2019 hundreds of people marched through Vedado in a procession against animal cruelty, organized through Facebook. Beatriz Batista, of the Cuban digital pet magazine *El Arca*, was granted permission by the *Consejo de Administracion Municipal de Plaza* to host a procession with other animal rights activists on 23rd Avenue, from Coppelia to the Colón Cemetery (Weissenstein 2019, EFE 2019). The procession was the first in decades organized by non-state actors to receive a permit for a march on Havana streets. That Fall, after posting alerts that stray dogs were being rounded up and euthanized in the city in advance of the King of

Spain's visit, a group of activists protested outside the office responsible for the roundup and succeeded in freeing 10 animals set to be euthanized (Batista 2019).

Organizing through social media and with the favorable coverage in Cuban independent media, they called for the government to approve an animal welfare law. In response, the National Assembly slated the Animal Welfare Law for consideration first in November 2020 and then in February 2021, because of the pandemic. But in late-February 2021, after the National Assembly failed to act on the legislation, animal welfare activists protested outside the Ministry of Agriculture. Less than a week later, on February 26, 2021, the Council of State approved a new Animal Welfare Law (Cuba Debate 2021).

Summer 2021

In the early summer of 2021, the daily COVID case counts on state media paired with alarming reports posted on social media from the province of Matanzas painted a picture of a crisis that, for the first time since COVID-19 was first detected on the island in March 2020, had surpassed the ability of the public health system to respond. Videos showed sick people languishing in the hallways of health centers and waiting in blocks-long queues for testing and treatment. Through private chats on WhatsApp, friends and relatives in the province confirmed the reports, and called for help.

Cubans had watched for more than a year news programs about health systems collapsing under the strain of COVID-19 cases from New York City to Milan. Now the unthinkable was happening in Cuba, despite months of strict measures that included nightly curfews, limitations on mobility, closed schools and workplaces, and closed borders. With flights to Cuba virtually at a standstill, it was nearly impossible for people to send material aid from abroad. New Trump-Era U.S. restrictions on sending remittances to Cuba made receiving funds from abroad similarly difficult. The same networks that provided aid in southern Havana neighborhoods after the tornado reactivated in order to raise money on the island to buy medicines only available at high prices on the Havana black market to send to Matanzas. As the number of new cases began to rise, *Ahora Sí* activists stopped their in-person activities and many turned their energies to collecting donations for Matanzas.

Meanwhile, the #soscuba hashtag emerged to bring attention to the sanitary crisis in Matanzas and call for donations. Social media users outside of Cuba had their own uses for the hashtag that reflected their own agendas, from relief from customs duties to humanitarian corridors and military intervention. Less than a week later, people in San Antonio de los Baños (Artemisa province) and Palma Soliano (Santiago de Cuba province) took to the streets in the unprecedented protests of J11.

Conclusion

In this paper I have highlighted a few examples that show how social networks have become central to everyday life on the island for a growing group of Connected Cubans. Using social media and social networks to engage in activism in new ways, people who did not previously participate in political activities are becoming activists, changing their relationship with the state.

As Cubans connect online, the state is also moving to populate the new digital commons. Cuban leaders are moving to social media, setting up Twitter accounts and beginning to use Facebook Live to stream everything from the daily morning COVID updates to presidential addresses (Inventario 2021). Important policy decisions are even communicated through Facebook (MINED 2021). Cuban state media reports quote Facebook user comments in their reporting, possibly opening a new channel of dialogue. Since Cubans outside the island are often those with greatest access, these spaces may contribute to expanding and renegotiating citizenship, allowing them to continue to participate in internal debates as citizens about the present and future of the country.

Bibliography

Acepto. 2019. "Dame tu Pulóver" Facebook, February 17, 2019.

Ahora Sí. 2021a. "¿Quiénes están detrás de #AhoraSí? Conoce al equipo." Facebook, June 3, 2021.

Ahora Sí. 2021b. "Ha pasado un mes...Ahora Sí" Facebook, June 27, 2021.

Alternativas. 2019. "Levantamiento por Tata Poet: Hola chicos este levantamiento lo hice yo personalmente.." Facebook, February 27, 2019.

Alternativas 2019b. "Levantamiento por Tata Poet: Chicos solo miren los zapatos..." Facebook, February 27, 2019.

Alonso Falcón, Randy, Oscar Figueredo Reinaldo, Yunier Javier Sifonte Díaz, Dinella García Acosta, Lissett Izquierdo Ferrer, and Andy Jorge Blanco. 2021. "Informatización en Cuba: Perspectivas para el 2021 (+VIDEO)." *Mesa Redonda/CubaDebate*, March 3, 2021.

Antón, Susana. 2019. "Conexión por datos 3G, ¿qué se hace para mejorarla?" *Granma*, February 28, 2019

Asamblea Nacional Cuba. 2018. "#Homero La Comisión propone diferir el concepto del matrimonio, es decir, que salga del Proyecto de la Constitución, como forma de respetar todas las opiniones. El matrimonio es una institución social y jurídica. La ley definirá el resto de elementos. #HacemosCuba @DiazCanelB cu" Twitter, December 18, 2018, 5:36 p.m.

Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular. 2018. *Tabloide Proyecto de Constitución de la República de Cuba*. Havana: Empresa de artes graficas Federico Engles.

Batista, Beatriz. 2019. "Manifestación pacífica contra "sacrificio." Facebook, November 11, 2019.

Cuba Debate. 2021. "Cuba aprueba decreto ley de bienestar animal" *Cuba Debate*, February 26, 2021.

"Cuba Tornado." 2019. Google My Maps.

EFE. 2019. "Cubans march against mistreatment of animals at state-approved demonstration" *Agencia EFE*, April 8, 2019.

Guevara, Yurisander, Rouslyn Navia Jordán, Loraine Bosch Taquechel, Libia Miranda Camellón. 2019. Cobertura especial: El tornado que afectó a La Habana en la noche de este 27 de enero (+ Videos, Fotos e Infografía)" *Juventud Rebelde*, January 28, 2019.

Iglesia Metodista En Cuba. 2018a."La Iglesia Metodista inicia la recolección de firmas en toda Cuba, para rechazar la propuesta del Artículo 68 presentada en el Proyecto de Constitución del 2018." Facebook, October 7, 2018.

Iglesia Metodista En Cuba. 2018b. "Descartada la propuesta del Artículo 68." Facebook, December 19, 2018 10:13am.

Inventario. 2019. "Diputados cubanos en Twitter." Proyecto Inventario. July 12, 2019.

MINED. 2021 "Resulta necesario aplazar la aplicación de la Resolución 16, de 26 de febrero de 2021, que aprueba el Programa de educación integral en sexualidad con enfoque de género y derechos sexuales y reproductivos en el Sistema Nacional de Educación, hasta tanto estén creadas las condiciones necesarias." Facebook, September 14, 201.

Perera Robbio, Alina. 2021. "Código de las Familias: da nuevos pasos un texto que es para todos (+ Video)." *Granma*, September 6, 2021.

Proyecto Abriendo Brechas de Colores-LGBTI. 2018a. "Dainet y Heydi." Facebook, September 25, 2018.

Proyecto Abriendo Brechas de Colores-LGBTI. 2018b. "Cinthya y su famila." Facebook, November 1, 2018.

Reloba de la Cruz, Xenia 2019. "How to stay connected in an "offline" country? Stories of Cubans' Internet Experience." MA thesis, Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario, Canada).

Reuters. 2019. "Cuba: landmark gay rights march planned despite reported threats." *Reuters*, May 11, 2019.

Ruiz, Ariel. 2019. "La policía de Cuba reprimió una marcha gay "no autorizada" en La Habana." *AmericaTeve*, May 11, 2019.

Weissenstein, Michael. 2019. "In possible first, Cuba allows march by animal activists." *AP*, April 7, 2019.