

## The Dictator's Dilemma? The Internet and U.S. Policy toward Cuba

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Authoritarian leaders in the information age are confronted with an unmistakable dilemma. On the one hand, the Internet and associated information and communication technologies offer enormous economic potential for developing countries, and the increasingly interconnected global economy thrives on openness of information. On the other hand, the information revolution poses new challenges for regimes that rely on centralized political control. Mexico's ruling party, for example, opened to the world in the early 1990s and relaxed its hold on the media but then chafed under pressure for further political reform by Internet-empowered supporters of the Zapatista movement. Currently, China weighs its growing Internet economy against the protests of the Falun Gong, whose members have organized mass demonstrations using e-mail and the World Wide Web. In countries where they can get access, networks of dissidents, activists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have shown that the Internet can be a useful tool in pressuring an authoritarian regime to change. So far, however, Cuba has been successful in staving off such political dangers of the Internet.

Unlike the telephone, which facilitates one-to-one communication between dispersed individuals, or radio and television, which allow for one-to-many broadcasting from a central location, the Internet is a many-to-many medium that permits each user to send to, and receive from, a multitude of recipients and sources. As such, it does not lend itself to centralized control. The interconnected, transnational nature of the Internet complicates the task of censorship. Readily available tools to conceal identity and the encryption embedded in commercial software make it harder for authorities to

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keep watch on their citizens. Inexpensive pricing (compared to international phone and fax calls) facilitates networking among civil society actors. While none of these factors mean that governments will fail to control the technology, each poses new and significant challenges to regulators in democratic and authoritarian regimes alike.

Indeed, the dictator's dilemma is real—but it may not be insoluble.<sup>1</sup> Protest does not equal democratization, and the Internet has yet to take a lead role in the demise of any authoritarian regime. Conventional wisdom may

**The information revolution has failed to vanquish the Cuban revolution.**

suggest that information-age dictators are doomed to downfall or economic extinction, but authoritarian regimes do not give up so easily, and few accept the inevitability of their decline. Most have sought to control the Internet in some way, minimizing subversive use of the medium while extracting tangible benefits. Different regimes have taken different approaches, and some are quite willing to err on the side of caution, promoting access to

the Internet where it directly benefits the regime and restricting it everywhere else. Such strategies are inevitably a compromise between political control and economic dynamism, but compromise is not capitulation. While an all-good-things-go-together optimism pervades much of today's thinking about the Internet's political impact, many authoritarian regimes are successfully staving off the dictator's dilemma.

Cuba is a case in point. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States has increasingly sought to promote democracy in Cuba by technological means. Since the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, international telecommunications have been strategically exempted from the U.S. embargo, and U.S. policy has attempted to engage the Cuban people through greater information flow.

During this period, the Cuban government has slowly but steadily allowed the development of its connection to the Internet. Contrary to the hopes of U.S. policymakers and Cuban exiles, however, the information revolution has failed to vanquish the Cuban revolution. Almost a decade after the regime first began to experiment with international computer networking, it is as authoritarian as ever. Hardliners are firmly in control of the government, and the government is still firmly in control of the Internet.

Cuba's cautious response to the Internet has been shaped by the economic and political incentives the regime has faced, as well as the dynamics of its antagonistic relationship with the United States. Information initiatives of U.S. policy, combined with its firm opposition to the Cuban government, have

heightened the security concerns of regime hardliners and encouraged them to maintain centralized control over the Internet. To minimize the threat that the new technology could pose while still profiting from its potential, Cuba has chosen to regulate the Internet by promoting access where it benefits the regime and restricting it where potentially subversive. For Cuban NGOs and dissident groups from across the political spectrum, this strategy means that an organization's access to the Internet—and its potential use of the medium for logistical operation—varies directly with its orientation toward the government. In such an environment, the Internet has brought no political change to Cuba, and it is unlikely to do so anytime soon.

### **U.S. Policy and the Cuban Political Environment**

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As with almost all political decisions the Castro regime has made in its 41 years, its response to the challenges of the Internet has been profoundly influenced by its relationship with the United States. Information and communication technologies have figured prominently in U.S.-Cuba relations since the early days of the Cuban Revolution—the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began clandestine radio broadcasting to Cuba as early as 1960, and U.S. Information Agency (USIA)-affiliated Radio Martí has beamed politically oriented programming toward the island since 1985. In the past decade, this age-old form of public diplomacy has been expanded into new media. Inspired by the role attributed to information flow in the demise of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, policymakers of the 1990s began to focus on opening up Cuba's closed society by improving the country's telecommunications linkages to the outside world.

The development of this new thinking led to the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) of 1992, which marked a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba. While maintaining firm opposition to the Cuban government and tightening certain aspects of the economic embargo, the CDA also sought to provide "support for the Cuban people" by facilitating humanitarian donations from U.S. NGOs, encouraging people-to-people contacts, and increasing information flow between the two countries. A major component of these provisions was the promotion of telecommunications services, previously prohibited under the embargo. As then-Congressman Robert Torricelli, sponsor of the legislation, wrote in a 1991 op-ed,

We should allow increased phone service with the island. We should provide facsimile machines to human-rights, church, and professional organizations, which would permit them to speak over the head of the Cuban government to fellow democrats throughout the world.<sup>2</sup>

Combining containment of the Castro regime with engagement of its popula-

tion was an awkward marriage at best: a compromise that sought to infuse a new approach into a traditional hardline Cuba policy while appeasing the Cuban-American political lobby and assuring the right that the United States was not getting soft on Cuba. While U.S. policymakers had hoped that Cuba would prove receptive to the initiatives, the Cuban government quickly labled them as a Trojan horse designed to undermine the Revolution from within.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation was not unique to Cuban officials. While most policymakers in the United States described the Cuba policy as the promotion

**Concerns over U.S.-led subversion have strengthened the hand of Cuban hardliners.**

of a peaceful, democratic transition, others employed more hard-line language. In April 1998, for instance, Marc Thiessen, press spokesman for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced that “the debate on Cuba has to be about ways to subvert the Castro regime.”<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the question of language, however, the actual process of implementing the people-to-people initiatives of U.S.

policy has shown that intentions go beyond simply encouraging rapprochement between the civil societies of both countries. Because the CDA requires that a U.S. NGO obtain a Treasury Department license for aid donations to Cuba, the U.S. government effectively retains veto power over the participation of any given applicant, many of which have long been critical of the embargo and the United States’ hard-line policy toward Cuba. According to Richard Nuccio, former special adviser to the president on Cuba, administration officials in recent years have adopted the view that there are both “dangerous” and “good” NGOs interested in working in Cuba, and they have taken a close look at the political orientation of the proposed Cuban partner when ruling on license approval. The balance has been further tipped toward anti-Castro groups with the passage of the 1996 Helms-Burton (Libertad) Act, which authorized the president to “furnish assistance ... for individuals and independent [NGOs] to support democracy-building efforts for Cuba.” Grants administered to U.S. NGOs under this provision have been directed overwhelmingly toward groups that strongly oppose the Cuban government and stand behind U.S. policy.<sup>5</sup>

In Cuba, concerns over U.S.-led subversion have strengthened the hand of hardliners within the regime who invoke frequent national security threats to justify the quashing of reform, attacks on internal opposition, and minimal opening to the outside world. Crackdowns on Cuban dissidents have increased since the active promotion of the CDA’s people-to-people initiatives. In February 1996, the government arrested 100 members of the

human rights group Concilio Cubano; further arrests have followed in the years since.<sup>6</sup> Last year, it passed an “antisubversion” law that mandates lengthy jail terms for independent journalists and others who are considered accomplices in U.S. efforts to undermine the regime. Much of the recent restrictions on political space, however, have been directed not at the traditional target of open opposition, but rather at the new NGOs that many have held up as potential initiators of peaceful reforms from within.<sup>7</sup> A notable casualty of the new political climate in Cuba was the Center for Study of the Americas (CEA), a think tank purged in 1996 for its progressive economic and political ideas and close relations with U.S. academics.<sup>8</sup>

### **Internet Regulation by Access Restriction**

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Around the time that policymakers in the United States were formulating the CDA, Cuba began experimenting with international computer networking, setting up an e-mail link through occasional long-distance phone calls to an Internet service provider (ISP) in Canada. The initial Cuban decision to establish this connection was a relatively low-profile and noncontroversial one, but some in the United States soon began to notice the e-mail service and took an interest in exploiting this new medium for their information initiatives. In 1992, a RAND report to the under secretary of defense for policy by Cuba scholars Edward Gonzalez and David Ronfeldt specifically mentioned the recently established e-mail connection and urged the United States to “build bridges across computer networks ... in the expectation that freer information flows should foster pluralist tendencies.”<sup>9</sup> In 1993, the cultural attaché of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana obtained two e-mail accounts with the approval of network administrators and posted information on U.S. policy to an electronic bulletin board in Cuba; the accounts were swiftly withdrawn in response.<sup>10</sup>

As the United States began to implement the CDA in the first half of the decade, and as it began to appear that it would incorporate the Internet into this policy, the Castro regime became more concerned about the subversive potential of full Internet access. According to the founder of Cubaweb, the official government website, most officials considered the Internet “an influence coming from the North,” the land of “the enemy.”<sup>11</sup> When a direct link was finally established in 1996, therefore, it was accompanied by a law that sought to establish strong centralized control over any use of the Internet within Cuba. Access to the Internet would be selective, the law stated, and would be granted “in a regulated manner ... giving priority to the entities and institutions most relevant to the country’s life and development.”<sup>12</sup>

In the years since, such prioritization of Internet access has been central

to the government's strategy for reaping positive returns from the medium while guarding against the possibility of subversion. Despite Cuban concerns over the destabilizing aims of U.S. policy and the political dangers that the Internet might present, there are many reasons the regime has chosen not to ignore this new medium. For one, Cuba has long realized the potential benefits that information technology can bring to traditional areas of development such as education and health care. As a result, it has consistently strived to promote the use of computers and the Internet to support these social gains of the Cuban Revolution. The Ministry of Public Health's network "Infomed," for instance, features online medical journals, pharmaceutical databases, and an e-mail list service for distributing health alerts to doctors and hospitals. Youth computing clubs offer classes in computer use and programming, as well as e-mail access (albeit domestic only) for many of their members.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the Internet offers a political benefit to a regime that has long sought to counter international criticism and improve its image without fundamentally changing its system. Externally oriented Internet resources such as the government's official Cubaweb site ([www.cubaweb.cu](http://www.cubaweb.cu)) provide an opportunity to show an "official face" to the world and tell the regime's version of domestic and international events. A variety of state publications are available online, including the international edition of the Communist Party newspaper *Granma*, which can be read in six languages. A 1997 article from the online version states the Party's perspective quite clearly: "It's somewhat paradoxical that the Internet, created in the United States and almost 70 percent operated from that country, has become an effective tool enabling this weekly to bring to the world what the world wants and is rarely able to know about Cuba: the truth."<sup>14</sup>

The greatest immediate benefit of the Internet for Cuban regime, however, may be economic. The medium has proved a boon for Cuba's growing tourist trade, both as a means to advertise through various government-sponsored sites and as a vehicle to book reservations, check flight times, or support credit card authorization. A website for online money transfer lets exiles send funds to their Cuban relatives, another key source of foreign currency. The regime has undertaken efforts to make the Internet available to Cuban firms and foreign joint ventures operating in the country, and several ISPs offer increasingly reliable service to these commercial customers. Furthermore, Cuba has long sought to be a scientific and technological power of the developing world, and it has privileged the use of the Internet in its growing biotechnology industry, including the online marketing of its products.

Clearly, the Internet offers numerous benefits to the Cuban government, but it also poses an undeniable threat to an authoritarian regime that wishes

to stay in power. If opposition groups and NGOs supportive of change could use the Internet to facilitate their logistical organization and transnational networking, they would likely bring greater pressure on the regime for its reform or outright replacement. Concern for this possibility is compounded by worries over the destabilizing potential of U.S. policy and the growing independence and international contacts of certain NGOs. The Cuban leadership clearly believes, as Vice President Raúl Castro claimed in an infamous 1996 speech, that “the *glasnost* which undermined the USSR and other socialist countries consisted of handing over the mass media, one by one, to the enemies of socialism.”

In response to this threat of Internet use by the opposition, Cuba has been particularly cautious in its strategy for Internet regulation. Rather than allowing widespread, market-driven access and trying to control Internet content through censorship, Cuba has promoted Internet access only where it directly benefits the regime and has restricted it everywhere else. As a result, Internet users constitute only a tiny minority of the country’s population of 11 million; 1999 figures claim that there are 25,500 e-mail accounts that can send messages internationally, and only 2,000 computers with direct access to the Web.<sup>15</sup> E-mail or Web access is permitted only through the workplace, and users share a single account much more frequently than they are allowed individual access. Outside of the workplace, there is no access available, not even for the lucky few with enough hard currency to afford it. Cuba has no Internet cafes or connections in public libraries and no ISPs that will offer service to the average paying customer. The few that are granted Internet access in Cuba enjoy uncensored access; there is no evidence that the regime burdens itself with the technologically challenging task of purifying the content of a global medium. Arguably, it does not need to—those with Internet access are already sympathetic to the government’s point of view.

### **Internet Access among Cuban NGOs**

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Cuba’s strategy of restricting access to the Internet effectively means that potential opponents or initiators of reform in civil society are denied the opportunity to use the medium for logistical organization. A look at Internet access and use among Cuban NGOs and dissident groups makes this fact abundantly clear.<sup>16</sup> For 16 organizations surveyed during the summer of 1998, the level of Internet access that each had been granted was directly correlated with its orientation toward the government. Cuban NGOs operating in the areas of environmental conservation and sustainable development—social priorities that the Cuban government shares—almost

universally enjoyed access to international e-mail. Several Cuban think tanks, also relatively pro-government in their orientation, received similar levels of e-mail access, and one had been granted the rare privilege of full Internet access with the ability to browse Web pages outside of the country. In addition, two protestant religious organizations in the good graces of the government had been e-mail users for many years. Such NGOs shared macro-level goals and priorities with the state and only rarely came into disagreement with officials about specific approaches to projects or activities.

The picture was quite different for NGOs that emphasized their neutrality or dissidents that openly criticized the regime. While sympathetic religious organizations had long enjoyed access to e-mail, the famously neutral Catholic charity Caritas endured an interminable delay for an official ruling on its request and still has not received access. Three dissident groups, openly critical of the government and continually subject to harassment by authorities and neighborhood committees, had no access to computer communications of any sort, could not use fax machines

**In a country of 11 million people, fewer than 2,000 computers have direct access to the Web.**

or place international phone calls, and constantly had their local telephone communication monitored. Several had received donated computers from supporters abroad, which they used for such tasks as word processing and database management, but authorities eventually confiscated the machines under the guise of "registering" them. In such an environment, serious use of the Internet to organize independence from or opposition to the regime is a distant prospect indeed.

Relatively pro-state organizations in Cuba with access to e-mail have found it to be an effective tool for networking with foreign NGOs, forming alliances with organizations that can provide funding and logistical assistance in carrying out their activities in Cuba. Several NGOs sympathetic to the regime use their international e-mailing capacity to help organize protests against U.S. policy toward Cuba, such as the Friendship Caravan that circumvents the embargo to bring unlicensed aid donations to the island. Each of the surveyed NGOs with access to e-mail rated it as their number one means of international communication, and many said that it had had a significant impact on the functioning of the organization. It is quite clear that use of the Internet can support transnational networking efforts among organizations aligned with the regime. As for its potential use by those who oppose the regime or seek significant reform, Cuba's strategy

of Internet regulation by access restriction appears to have the medium well under control. With no access to computers at all, and minimal access to telecommunications of any sort, critical or even neutral organizations will not be following the example of the Zapatistas or Falun Gong anytime soon.

## Conclusion

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Cuba is a prime example of why the development of information and communication technologies—even antihierarchical, many-to-many technologies such as the Internet—does not necessarily favor a democratic political system. The introduction of the Internet in any authoritarian country may present a new set of challenges to the regime, but its actual impact will be mediated by intervening social factors—among them the way that the government chooses to regulate the technology. Authoritarian regimes will base their approach to the Internet, and specific regulation strategy, on the combination of threats and benefits that they perceive from the medium.

In the case of Cuba, concerns over the subversive potential of U.S. policy have encouraged the country's hardliners to err on the side of caution when approaching the Internet, maintaining strong centralized control through a strategy of access restriction. This approach has allowed the regime certain economic, political, and social gains, while guarding against Internet use by dissidents and NGOs that might seek political opening or openly oppose the government. Certainly, Cuba cannot reap as much economic benefit from its state-restrained Internet as authoritarian regimes like China and Singapore, which promote widespread, market-driven access to the technology. Whether this presents a dictator's dilemma to which Fidel Castro will succumb, however, is far from certain.

Since the 1992 passage of the Cuban Democracy Act, an important element of U.S. policy has been predicated on the assumption that furthering the information revolution in Cuba will contribute to openness within its society. While the theories behind CDA were first conceived before the Internet was on the radar screen of U.S. policymakers, the new medium has been incorporated into this strategy as it has developed in Cuba and has posed challenges to other authoritarian regimes around the world. Other media, such as the telephone, have had a measurable impact on the island; international phone service has dramatically improved communication between Cubans and relatives in exile, and it has facilitated the work of independent journalists, who dictate their reports by phone to colleagues in Miami. The Internet, supposedly the most unrestrainable of information and communication technologies, has not had comparable effects. The Cuban government has developed a stable regulatory strategy for the Internet, and

all other things being equal, it is unlikely to alter this approach. Changes in other variables, from U.S. policy to Cuba's economic health, might influence the regime's response to the Internet, but the Internet alone will not bring democracy to Cuba.

The case of Cuba also offers a larger lesson for interpreting the dictator's dilemma in the information age. While Cuba's experience does not invalidate the idea that the diffusion of the Internet can pose significant chal-

lenges to authoritarianism, it does show that authoritarian regimes of the information age have more options than simply democratization or economic decline. Governments may opt for a less risky approach, limiting access to the medium while still securing some economic benefits. Networks of dissidents and reform-minded NGOs have shown that they can use new technological tools to place pressure

on their governments, but their information-empowered activism is limited by their access to technology, a factor over which regimes can choose to retain full control. In many countries around the world, the Internet may eventually work to the detriment of authoritarian rule, but such an outcome is never a foregone conclusion. Let us not assume that the dictator's dilemma will be resolved in favor of democracy simply because we might like it to be so.

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democracy to Cuba.

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## Notes

1. Though the concept itself has been more widely invoked, the term "dictator's dilemma," applied to the Internet, was coined by Larry Press and developed in Christopher R. Kedezie, *Communication and Democracy: Coincident Revolutions and the Emergent Dictator's Dilemma*, (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1997).
2. Robert G. Torricelli, "Let Democracy Shine through an Open Door: We Don't Have to Accept Castro to Increase Ties with Cuba," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1991, M5.
3. See frequent speeches by Fidel Castro after 1994 (especially July 26, 1995) and also Vice President Raúl Castro's report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party on March 23, 1996 (reprinted in *Granma International*, April 10, 1996).
4. Tom Carter, "Lawmakers with Cuban Ties Try to Raise Heat on Castro," *Washington Times*, April 24, 1998, A1.
5. Ana Radelat, "U.S. Approves New Helms-Burton Grants as Cuba Cracks Down on Dissent," *CubaInfo* 11, no.3 (February 22, 1999): 1-2.
6. Administration official Richard Nuccio has argued that the February 1996 crackdown on Concilio Cubano came in direct response to efforts by European Commission vice president Manuel Marin to "close the gap" in U.S.-Cuba relations and encourage reform along the lines of the U.S. policy. While European initiatives may

- have played a role, however, they clearly did so only in the context of cooperation with the United States on the already established strategy. See Nuccio, "Cuba: A U.S. Perspective," in Robert N. Haass, ed., *Transatlantic Tensions: The United States, Europe, and Problem Countries* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).
7. With the onset of economic difficulties at the beginning of the 1990s, the Cuban government began to allow the formation of NGOs that could supplement its development efforts and more easily attract funds from foreign donors. A variety of associations have sprung up in the past decade, promoting such causes as sustainable development, conservation, religious charity, and social, political, and economic research. All NGOs that exist legally are registered with the Cuban Ministry of Justice. Almost all operate autonomously, but they are rarely openly critical of the state. Many, however, favor decentralization of political power and novel solutions to economic problems. See Gillian Gunn, "Cuba's NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?" *Cuba Briefing Paper Series 7* (February 1995).
  8. See Carollee Bengelsdorf, "Intellectuals under Fire," *In These Times*, September 18, 1996: 27-29; Maurizio Giuliano, *El Caso CEA, Intelectuales e Inquisidores en Cuba: ¿Perestroika en la Isla?* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1998).
  9. Edward Gonzalez and David Ronfeldt, *Cuba Adrift in a Postcommunist World* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1992), 73-74.
  10. On the history of Cuban computer networking, see Nelson Valdés, "Cuba, the Internet, and U.S. Policy," *Cuba Briefing Paper Series 13* (March 1997); MOSAIC Group, *The Global Diffusion of the Internet Project: An Initial Inductive Study* (McLean, Va.: Center for Information Strategy and Policy, 1998), <<http://www.agsd.com/gdi97/gdi97.html>>.
  11. Geri Smith, "Yahoo, Stay Home," *Business Week*, November 29, 1999, 206.
  12. The text of Decree-Law 209, *Acceso desde la Republica de Cuba a Redes Informáticas de Alcance Global*, is published in *Gaceta Oficial de la Republica de Cuba*, Año 94, no. 27, edición ordinaria (September 13, 1996): 423-424 (translation by the author).
  13. See <<http://www.infomed.sld.cu>>; MOSAIC Group, *The Global Diffusion of the Internet Project*.
  14. "GI Digital Edition: One Year Old," *Granma International*, April 30, 1997.
  15. Jesus Martínez, "The Net in Cuba," *Matrix News* 901 (January 1999). These numbers have likely increased since then, but not significantly.
  16. All of the following data is based on confidential interviews with the author, conducted in Havana, Cuba, between August 15 and September 13, 1998.

