THE STRUGGLE TO BELONG

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

Blogging in Cuba: a manifestation of social disorder?

(Abstract)

Paper prepared for the RC21 Conference, 2011
Section 15. Urban Disorder and Social Cohesion

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The political debate in Cuba appears to be shifting away from the traditional spaces of public participation created by the state. This paper describes the uniqueness of the Internet in Cuba, and its role as the emerging platform where divergent political debates are taking place. The Cuban blogosphere can be interpreted as that stage for communication activism and civic participation. Nonetheless, alternative political opinions are not tolerated by the cohesive 'revolutionary' society, and the government interprets the exercise of these opinions as manifestations of social disorder. This study set out to examine whether blogging have foster greater social cohesion in Cuba, and how bloggers and blog readers perceive this activity. With this purpose in mind, and following a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews with bloggers and blog readers as well as a scan of various online blogs were conducted. The following questions were explored: who uses this space in Cuba, who takes part in the online political debate, and what is the impact that this practice has had in the Cuban society.

From all the disparate forms that new social practices of communication can take (e.g. emails, chats, tweets, live postcast, youtube videos, etc) only blogs were chosen for this study. The blog represents a personal voice in a public platform. Its spontaneity subverts the hierarchy of mass media, institutions, and other conventional channels of public expression. At the same time, it is less ephemeral than other forms since postings can usually be accessed from archives. The length of the text is optional allowing the opportunity for ideas to unfold. Additionally, the blog provides a medium for other individuals to comment and dialogue.

With the advent of the Net, a potential new medium for public participation in Cuba was created. Individuals and various institutional sectors are occupying this space with different purposes. Still, the presence of personal opinions in individual's own terms and voice is not widely spread, partially because public space and media in Cuba has been traditionally managed by the government speaking for a cohesive/uniform society of 'revolutionary' identity, but also because access to new ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and the Net in general is very limited.

This study finds that qualities of the digital divide in Cuba point out to serious exclusions from the online political debate and possibilities of the Net in general. There is a group of dissident writers that are disrupting the traditional political debate through their writing in online blogs. They are struggling for their rights of recognition outside a 'revolutionary' identity. Some of them also have a political agenda that foresees structural changes in the Cuban society. This insurgent writing brought together bloggers and other members of the Cuban political community (inside and outside the Island) in a process of community making. To a limited degree, the discussions put forward by these bloggers, are filtering out to a wider audience.

In general, the relevance these blogs have acquired appears to be associated with a combination of factors, among them: a clear divergent political position to that of the Cuban government, an alliance with dissidents as well as the support, divulgation and recognition that members of the international community offer these writers. In addition, an attractive discourse along with topics that engage a wide variety of readers, the transparency of the authors' identity, and a commitment to continuously write and post about current issues adds to their popularity.

However, the unique digital divide poses a firm barrier as to the role blogging can play in forging social cohesion among Cubans inside and outside the Island, and to the benefits it could bring to the political debate.

Because society in Cuba constitutes a cohesive 'revolutionary' entity that cannot be contested, the mainstream discourse frames these activities as threats and cyberterrorism. The state, also part of this uniform society, is directly challenged by this disruptive endeavor, and interprets it as a challenge to hegemonic power. This rhetorical process further marginalizes subversive bloggers, and demonstrates the lack of capacity of the Cuban government to negotiate with dissident voices.