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# If They Show *Prison Break* in the United States on a Wednesday, by Thursday It Is Here: Mobile Media Networks in Twenty-First-Century Cuba

Television & New Media  
13(5) 399–414  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1527476412443564  
<http://tvnm.sagepub.com>



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## **Abstract**

This article describes practices of informal digital media circulation emerging in urban Cuba between 2005 and 2010, drawing from interviews and ethnographic research in the city of Santiago de Cuba. The Cuban new media landscape is supported by informal networks that blend financial and social exchanges to circulate goods, media, and currency in ways that are often illegal but are largely tolerated. Presenting two case studies of young, educated Cubans who rely on the circulation of film and television content via external hard drives for most of their media consumption, I suggest that the emphasis of much existing literature on the role of state censorship and control in Cuban new media policy overlook the everyday practices through which Cubans are regularly engaged with Latin and U.S. American popular culture. Further, informal economies have been central to everyday life in Cuba both during the height of the Soviet socialist era and in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union that has seen a juxtaposition of some market reforms alongside centrally planned policies. In the context of nearly two decades of economic crisis, consumer shortages and a dual economy, Cuban people use both informal and state-sanctioned networks to acquire goods ranging from groceries to furnishings and domestic appliances. Understanding the informal media economy of Cuba within this broader context helps to explain how the consumption of commercial American media is largely uncontroversial within

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Cuban everyday life despite the fraught politics that often dominates discussions of Cuban media policy.

### **Keywords**

informal economies, anthropology, consumption, new media, hard drives, Cuba

One of the misconceptions underlying popular discussion about Cuban media is that the media landscape from the perspective of the average Cuban is necessarily dominated by a sense of censorship. It is certainly true that all telecommunications and media infrastructure in Cuba is state controlled and that access to such technologies and media is determined by political rather than commercial considerations. Furthermore, much state-produced Cuban media is dedicated to news and current affairs and closely connected to the viewpoints and objectives of the socialist government. Consequently, media such as newspapers, television and radio broadcasts, and more recent media and communication technologies such as mobile phones and the internet have been central and visible platforms upon which the cold war politics of the United States and Cuba have been staged in recent years. These tensions have prompted significant attention from both journalists and academics, such that both press and scholarly literature on Cuban media are dominated by a few key themes. International press coverage of Cuban media has focused closely in recent years on two themes: policy changes under Raúl Castro to enable the purchase of mobile telephones and home computers, and the (increasingly difficult) experiences of a small number of prominent Cuban bloggers whose perspectives on life in Cuba often diverge greatly from those of state-produced media (see, e.g., Reuters July 7, 2011; Reuters June 18, 2010; Reuters March 22, 2011; BBC News 4 September 2009; BBC News 14 October 2009). Both of these themes have been further explored by a growing academic literature on the policies, politics and texts that have grown in the Cuban new media landscape in the past decade (Hoffmann 2004; Venegas 2010). Another notable topic of Cuban media scholarship the initiatives of such organizations as Radio Martí and TV Martí, which have been broadcasting news and political critique in Spanish to Cuba from the United States since 1983, although broadcasts are effectively jammed by Cuba (Alexandre 1992; Johnson 2010; Ruíz Miyares 1999).

What has received much less attention is the role of television and electronic media in the everyday life of average Cubans, who rely upon Cuban media for their understanding of world and national events, but for whom media consumption is more typically a form of entertainment or escape than a forum for political resistance. In the twenty-first century, Cuban consumers have seen the development of a new media landscape in which state broadcasts have been supplemented by a wider range of entertainment and communication choices than was technologically possible or ideologically tolerated in the Soviet socialist years. Although the Cuban media landscape is in some ways different from its neighbors in the Americas by the absence of

commercial media and some limits on access to media technologies, there are also ways in which the typical media consumption in Cuba is much the same as anywhere in Latin America. For the most part, people switch on their televisions to enjoy the evening *telenovela*, rent or copy DVDs to watch Hollywood movies, and a few also check their email to keep up with faraway friends and family.

Recognizing similarities to other media landscapes is as important as outlining the differences if we want to understand how and why the media system is such an important dimension of everyday consumption in contemporary Cuba. In particular, this article discusses how the tactics of invention and circumvention that Cuban consumers use in other spheres of everyday life are also deployed in their pursuit of electronic entertainment. Indeed, it is the pursuit of such entertainment, much more than an interest in politics, which motivates Cuban media consumption. Later, I explore how “mobile media”—a phrase of increasing currency in media studies—take unique and specific forms in Cuba and also move technology-enabled sectors of the Cuban community closer to the global circuits of popular culture that dominate the media landscapes of their contemporaries elsewhere in the Americas. But first, it is important to understand how informal networks have long been important to most aspects of Cuban consumption—and how since the 1990s, *lo informal*—the informal—has in many ways become the definitive manner in which the problems of everyday life are resolved (Fernández 2000, 29–32).

## Informal Networks in Post-Soviet Cuba

My own research on Cuban media has formed part of a wider study of everyday consumer practices in post-Soviet Cuba, such as shopping for groceries and furnishing and renovating houses (Pertierra 2011). This research began with fourteen months of participant observation in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba in 2003 and 2004, and continued with follow-up visits to Cuba in 2006, 2008, and 2009. Across each of these visits, I have also conducted semistructured interviews with a combined total of slightly more than forty people of varying age groups, on their ideas and practices that relate to the acquisition of consumer goods (including media and communications technologies), as well as interviews with fifteen of their Cuban relatives in Miami in 2009, and in Spain in 2010–2011. However, for this article I have deliberately selected only two case studies, of individuals with whom I have had a wider research relationship beyond the limits of the interviews excerpted below. Although the limited sample size of this research can give neither a representative picture of Cuban media consumption nor a clear taste of future Cuban media trends, I argue that these case studies do exemplify how Cuban media practices might best be understood by locating such case studies within the broader context of consumers’ practices in their post-Soviet economy.

While Cubans may not always define their current experiences of post-Soviet socialism through the prism of political censorship, the quality that most agree *does* define daily life in a post-Soviet economy is the perception of scarcity (Pertierra 2011,

75–106). A lack of access to goods (not only media technologies but also more basic consumer goods such as groceries) is such a common frustration for Cuban citizens that it has become the most common complaint that people make about their lives, regardless of political affiliation, age, gender, or race. As many scholars have documented, the economic crisis that gripped Cuba in the early 1990s when the withdrawal of Soviet support was compounded by the implementation of U.S. trade sanctions, led to waves of economic reforms in which the state has reduced its role in the distribution of certain goods, without opening the economy to market forces in the ways which fostered consumer growth in other postsocialist economies of Europe or Asia. As a result, most manufactured goods are expensive, hard to find, only sporadically available, and in some cases are not legally sold in Cuban stores. Unsurprisingly, when faced with such circumstances, Cuban consumers who do actually have the means to purchase goods turn to the black and grey markets, largely facilitated through informal networks of friends and family, to meet their needs. It is important to note that whether using “black” markets (illegal but sometimes tolerated) or “grey” ones which may be semi-legal and overt, acquiring goods through informal means is standard daily practice, and is seen as normal or even admirable behavior that is not necessarily a disavowal of the Cuban state or of the socialist economy. Anthropologist Marisa Wilson has noted with reference to food provisioning in Cuba that “legal rules may be broken in everyday life, but there is moral difference in the local economy between acceptable and unacceptable illegal activity, a distinction which stems from the wider cultural system” (2009, 175). Black market transactions are not relegated to the domain of the poor or marginal, but are also conducted (in most cases quite openly) by upstanding members of the Cuban community, including salaried professionals, union members, operators of licensed small businesses, and devoted parents. Using black and grey markets to acquire consumer goods is seen simply as a necessary and inevitable way to provide for one’s family in difficult circumstances.

As scholars of other socialist societies have suggested, a thriving informal sector can actually enable the maintenance of a socialist state (Ledeneva 1998, 3; Pérez-López 1995, 1; Sampson 1987, 122; Verdery 1996, 27). Although socialism may influence forms that informal markets take, there are many other market systems in which a weakness of the state enables informal economies to prosper. Research in West Africa and Latin America for example has described communities in which many economic practices have minimal interaction with state bureaucracies (Castells and Portes 1989; Hart 1973). Other ethnographies have demonstrated that affluent capitalist economies have important informal economic sectors that may compensate for formal sector opportunities in marginalized areas (as Mollona found in Sheffield 2005), exploit social capital to support new migrant communities (as Stoller notes in his research on African traders in New York City 1996) or circumvent bureaucracy in such a way that it effectively bolsters the formal economy (as Castells and Portes describe with reference to Italy 1989). Cubans are therefore not alone in combining official institutions and informal networks for everyday consumption, although there are local forms of informal trade that can be substantially different from informal

economies elsewhere. Nor are Cubans alone in using social networks as a useful strategy for consumption both formal and informal. Consumers in all societies, whether socialist, capitalist, or otherwise, cultivate personal relationships that defuse the social distance that trade is seen to create. Nevertheless, the emphasis in socialist states on the state-managed distribution of goods does seem to have a particular countereffect in that many socialist consumers particularly value their personal networks as a resource to offset state-imposed constraints. Several anthropologists studying the transition to postsocialism in Central and Eastern Europe recognized that in many socialist era communities, “social connections were the principal means of obtaining scarce consumer goods and services” (Berdahl 1999, 115). The literature demonstrates that in socialist Russia, East Germany, Romania, and Hungary, gifts, barter and bribes were at least as common as commercial shopping for everyday groceries (Berdahl 1999, 118–20; Kenedi 1981; Ledeneva 1998; Verdery 1996, 27–29). As one of Daphne Berdahl’s informants in a newly reunified Germany explained, in a socialist economy, “Money actually did help you: it helped maintain the connections! But the connections were most important” (1999, 120, see also Sampson 1987, 131).

Within this context, where practically all realms of consumption rely on informal networks of support that both make up for and, paradoxically, maintain a centralized economic structure, it is hardly surprising that global developments in digital media technologies have allowed Cubans to create a flourishing informal media economy, in which both material technologies and digital contents are exchanged, gifted, rented, and sold. Individual media technologies have enjoyed different degrees of support and distribution in postrevolutionary Cuba. At one end of the spectrum, television and radio have been central to the development of Cuban socialism, with the state using television and radio programming to shape revolutionary communities. In addition to harnessing radio and television broadcasts to further the revolution, the Cuban state actively distributed media technologies to much of the population. Televisions were acknowledged to be important symbolically and practically, as the revolution was literally brought into living rooms through televisions acquired by way of workplace schemes and neighborhood committees. Such acknowledgment is in stark contrast to the limited tolerance of other media technologies outside of work-related activities. There has been intensive investment in telecommunications infrastructure since the 1990s, which suggests that the Cuban government intends to gradually increase nationwide access to new media and communications. In February 2011, a fiber optic cable from Venezuela was connected to Cuba just kilometers from my own research site in Santiago (Reuters 10 February 2011). However, until April 2008, personal internet access and personal cell phone accounts were prohibited for Cuban citizens, although anecdotal evidence suggests a thriving black market has existed in both technologies for some years. In 2009 World Bank figures list Cubans as having some of the lowest rates of cell phone subscription (4 subscribers per 100 people) and internet access (14.3 users per 100 people) in the Americas, although such data fail to capture the many informal ways in which Cubans make use of informal and/or illegal services (World Bank 2009).

Since the beginning of the new millennium there have been thriving informal networks through which stereos, computers, VCR, and later DVD players have reached a small but notable minority of the Cuban population. In 2008 the same legislation that allowed Cubans to buy cell phone contracts permitted the sale of DVD players and home computers. Prior to this, only a very few Cubans could obtain home computers, VCRs, or DVD players that were “licensed” by the government for specific work-related purposes. Families with senior professionals at state enterprises might be permitted to buy a computer “with papers,” or a senior media professional might have had a home VCR “with papers.” But before 2008, the principal method of acquiring such technologies was through the black market. Their legalization in 2008 seems if anything to have bolstered the black market trade, as the prices for such goods in government stores remain higher than through informal networks.

VCRs, DVD players, and computer parts can be brought into Cuba in a number of ways; throughout the 1990s, seamen were commonly believed to be the major source of VCR players. The large numbers of professional workers sent overseas on “missions,” working as doctors, engineers, or consultants in developing countries, are permitted to send home large quantities of goods for personal use, and it is thought that many people use their quota to send home items to be resold by friends and family. A more personal, but still common, source for electronic goods is in the suitcases of Cuban emigrants or entrepreneurial tourists on return visits, although at various times customs prohibitions on such items have been enforced. In these and other ways, the very constraints that prevent many Cubans from media technologies have presented opportunities for profit, at least for those with access to international travel. This black market has not been consistently policed, as the Cuban government has chosen to ignore the entry of black market media technologies, focusing instead on policing the rare moments in which people use such media for explicitly counterrevolutionary protest.

With a growing number of Cubans having access to computers, DVD players, and other media technologies, other opportunities for profit lie in the rental and reproduction of music, games, film, and television programming. Over the years that I have been following media consumption patterns in Cuba, from 2003 to 2010, the variety of film and television programs available, and the speed with which they arrive to Santiago de Cuba, have notably increased. The latest evidence of the acceleration of the informal media flows that supplement formal broadcasting channels is the use of external hard drives as mobile media devices by technology-literate Cubans, particularly the young and educated.

## External Hard Drives as Mobile Media

In media studies, the term *mobile media* has been used to refer to the practices surrounding portable devices that are networked and/or based on cellular service (Goggin 2008). A body of literature has emerged examining global developments in which mobile phones, previously regarded as merely communicative devices, are media

devices as well, for viewing films, playing games and accessing the internet. Anthropologists have been engaged in such research, not least because cell-phone technology has been strongly adopted among low-income communities, well beyond the Anglo-American strongholds that have been typically featured in mainstream media scholarship. Mobile media have been shown to be especially appealing for consumers in places where the older infrastructures of broadcasting and telephone service are not easily accessed or not developed; furthermore, many plans for mobile phones involve only small outlays of cash at regular intervals, making payment more manageable in the context of poverty or unpredictable income (Horst and Miller 2005; Pertierra et al. 2002; Slater and Kwami 2005). In most developing countries studied in such literature, commercial corporations oversee the investment—and enjoy the profits—of mobile telephony and/or internet infrastructure where governments have been unable or unwilling to build one. But in Cuba, limitations on foreign investment, and ongoing controls that limit individual access to networks, mean that mobile media use lags behind most other Caribbean nations.

In Cuba, a different kind of mobile media is having an important impact on everyday media consumption: the external hard drive. The technologically knowledgeable, rather than relying on an infrastructure to upload or download media content, use external hard drives connected to devices via USB or other ports to copy and move large amounts of media content between computers, for later viewing on media players or burned in CD or DVD format. It is the nonnetworked quality of portable hard drives that makes them an ideal technology in Cuba—they do not require a constant connection to electricity and are increasingly affordable. Unlike better known forms of mobile media, hard drives can operate independently of telephone, internet, and computer networks. Whereas internationally the connectivity of mobile media is an appealing feature, in Cuba the disconnectivity of hard drives is even more appealing. Mobility is in this case produced by physical portability, such that relatives abroad can bring hard drives to Cuba when visiting, or send money for drives found relatively easily on the informal market. The use of external hard drives as mobile media is limited to those with a home computer and the technology to use such devices. Nonetheless, the increasing use of hard drives to copy and circulate media content is affecting the wider community by increasing the diversity of media content available on the informal market, allowing the development of generalist and specialist media rental services and almost immediate access to international shows and series. Such services mostly rely on the almost-weekly arrival of “packets” (*paquetes*), which are digital compilations of films and television that have recently been broadcast in Mexico and the United States. To give a sense of the media consumption practices, including the circulation of packets, that are commonplace for people with access to hard drives, I present below Milene and Noel—both identifying as white, under thirty, with a college education and relatives abroad. During my discussions I was struck that they regarded their access to and consumption of literally hundreds of television programs and films as normal, despite living in a country in which almost none of the hardware that supports their consumption habits can be bought in official shops, and in which all

formal media channels are controlled by a centralized government that is officially hostile to the commercial aspects of globalized consumer culture. Just how this may be so, and why it seems to work, is addressed toward the end of this article.

## Milene

Milene is a twenty-year-old university student. She has her own laptop computer, which a relative bought for her. She has two external hard drives with capacities of 500 GB and 250 GB. Her smaller drive was bought overseas by relatives and given to her. The bigger drive was bought by other relatives in Spain and sent to Cuba via mutual friends. She has had the 500-GB drive for five months, and the other for more than a year. Because Milene uses a computer for her studies, her family abroad send computer-related gifts to her rather than items such as clothes. But her computer and hard drives, she admits, are used for her leisure time as much as for her studies; since there's "nothing to do" in Santiago, she spends all her time at home. Milene describes her film and television viewing habits as a "vice," and she will often stay up until 3 A.M. to finish a television series, but she says she is far from abnormal in the number of shows she collects and watches, and that "70 percent of people her age do the same thing," at least among her circle of family and friends.

As we start to look at the contents, Milene says that she "copies everything" ("yo bajo de todo") including series, films, soap operas, music, and Japanese anime, of which she is a fan. Although she doesn't know the person who downloads the material she gets, almost all of her hard drive contents come from one friend, who gets it from another friend. On the day of our conversation she remarked that the contents now were quite "old," by which she meant that she hadn't updated them for more than two weeks. Milene had seventy-one films stored, which was normal or perhaps on the low side for her, as she tends to delete films once she has watched them, and only keeps those that she thinks her sister might enjoy or that she regards as "classics," such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Silence of the Lambs*. She rarely stores an entire series, and tends to copy them in installments, but Milene had 123 episodes of various television shows from the United States including *Battlestar Galactica*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Mentalist*, and *One Tree Hill*. Telenovelas she regards as a separate category, and although she does not watch them very attentively, Milene did have episodes from six different telenovelas stored on her hard drive (enough to fill between six and eight CDs). Milene tends not to store entire telenovela series, but they are so prevalent on the hard drives from which she copies—especially those from the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Mexico—that she will watch them with her mother or friends. Many of her friends copy telenovela series even though they are broadcast on Cuban television, because it is "the fashion" to watch the series to the end and find out what is going to happen before the national series has concluded.

In Milene's opinion, television series are most in demand among Cuban consumers, followed closely by music videos, with young people copying reggaeton music videos or audio files, which are easy to store in the hundreds as they take up less disc

space. Milene has around one hundred songs stored on her hard drive, which she describes as “mostly old.” She is even less interested in other genres of television content that are found in the “packets,” listing reality shows, talk shows, the Grammy Awards, beauty pageants, and “shows from Miami” as among the items that she does not burn even though many of her friends do. Instead she dedicates more than half of her hard drive space to the anime series that she loves, and on the day of our conversation Milene had twelve entire anime series, with each containing approximately fifty episodes.

As Milene knows many people in the circles of students and IT professionals who either download small items themselves or get free copies of packets that are destined for rental businesses, she never pays for hard drive content. In turn, she frequently copies films or television series for friends or family members to watch, either on computers or DVD players. Through her university friends, she has come into contact with people running successful rental businesses, including one acquaintance whom she describes as having a “bookshelf full of more than hundred hard drives full of shows, and he rents them out.” Another rental business specialized in copying old television shows from VHS to DVD, and this collection focused on Brazilian telenovelas and early U.S. hit shows that were popular among Cubans in the 1990s.

## Noel

Noel is twenty-five years old and recently completed his engineering degree and now works for a government ministry. As his father works abroad and sends him remittances, Noel has had a computer at home for around six or seven years, one of the first in the neighborhood. Just a few weeks before our interview in 2009, he had been sent a new external hard drive with 500 GB capacity from an overseas relative. Previously he had a 60-GB external hard drive, which he has now installed in his computer. Before he had the external hard drive, Noel would sometimes remove his computer hard drive and take it with him to copy large quantities of media. But as he found this a bother, until 2008 Noel would most typically take two or three USB drives with a total capacity of around 10 GB and look for something specific that he wanted to copy, such as an episode of a television series that he had missed.

Since acquiring a high-capacity portable drive, Noel has become less discriminate in the media he copies, although he still dislikes leaving too much content on his hard drive and tends to organize his files and delete the films and television series he has already watched. In our conversation we likened this tendency to keeping his room neat and tidy. Noel particularly enjoys films, and at the time of our interview he had copies of all of the 2009 Oscar-nominated films on his hard drive; Noel most actively seeks films, including nominees for categories such as Best Foreign Film. By talking to friends or checking the internet, Noel finds the list of nominees, and he and his friends share news about which films are circulating on the latest packets of audiovisual media so they can collect all the entrants and watch them before the Oscars are awarded. When a new packet arrives, Noel’s friends let him know; he and his friends

circulate media among themselves and with others for free, but he does know people in his neighborhood who use rental businesses regularly. If a typical packet contains between thirty and forty films, Noel will begin by copying them all from his friend, and then deleting those of no interest, ending up with between six and nine films in his estimation. Noel explains that the contents of packets are mostly geared to the most rentable media, and are full of action films or other genres that he dislikes.

Although packets sometimes arrive weekly, Noel can spend up to a month waiting for new media that is worth his while to copy from friends. During our interview, Noel had not updated his hard drive for more than three weeks, and the most recent packet was numbered "Packet 191/192." In addition to several of Oscar-nominated films, this packet included the bootleg version of "Wolverine" that had been circulating online. Television series also took up much of Noel's hard drive space, and he had selections from more than fifteen U.S. television series during our conversation, including *24*, *Prison Break*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *The Sopranos*. Although *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Sopranos* were being broadcast on Cuban television at the time, Noel had been watching the newer episodes to get ahead of the weekly broadcast. Like Milene, Noel listed a number of genres that formed the bulk of packets but in which he was uninterested, so that telenovelas, talk shows, reality shows, music compilations, and wrestling were among the shows that some of his neighbors and friends enjoyed but that he disregarded.

## **Paquetes as Transnational Media Networks**

The media rental businesses for which these packets are produced are not an entirely new phenomenon in the Cuban informal market. In the early 2000s, when video rental businesses were prospering in Santiago de Cuba, cassettes of films and occasionally older television series would circulate among business owners (Pertierra 2009). They originated in Havana, said to have been smuggled in from Mexico or videotaped from illegal satellite connections. This system was effective; it could take as little as three weeks to receive a popular film on videocassette in Santiago de Cuba after cinematic release abroad. But new stock was not quickly replenished, and a typical video rental business would hold a catalog of perhaps forty titles at a given time because they needed to reuse videocassettes. In comparison, a hard drive with a capacity of 250 GB, which in 2009 was no longer considered high capacity in Cuba, can store more than two hundred television episodes or films, allowing illegal rental businesses to have a much wider range of stock. Furthermore, the ability to store films and other media on external drives makes downloading films, given Cuba's limited internet network, more possible. Although I have not interviewed people engaged in such activities, a number of informants told me that IT administrators for large state operations with internet accounts such as hotels or large workplaces will consolidate individual (i.e., small) worker internet quotas to download media content using file-sharing networks. Before downloading programs, software is downloaded that accommodates slow connections and downloads files in small files over hours or

days. Not all downloading takes place illegally; many of the most active in Santiago de Cuba are students whose degrees grant them high-quota internet access. IT students in other regions of Cuba have established websites on the Cuban intranet with files of films and television shows for download by fellow students.

The speed with which packets arrive in Santiago is frankly astonishing, and Noel only slightly exaggerates when he says, "If they show *Prison Break* in the United States on a Wednesday, by Thursday it is here." In 2009, I watched television in Mexico and Miami for two weeks before arriving in Santiago de Cuba, and during my first week, episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* broadcast in Mexico two weeks prior were already on Noel's hard drive. That same week, I talked to one of Noel's neighbors about a comedy show *Esta Noche Tonight*, which broadcasts on the Miami channel Mega TV, and he had already seen one of the episodes received in his packet that I watched ten days earlier in Miami. Although the contrasts typically drawn between life in Cuba and life in Miami have never accurately portrayed the ongoing connections across the Florida Straits, the mobility of television programs in 2009 demonstrate the connections in almost real-time that increasingly characterize the consumption practices of urban Cubans, even if these are not representative of all sectors of the population.

As few Cubans have had privileged internet access, or even access to computers, in recent years there have emerged three circles of media user. In the inner circle are those who have direct access to downloading programs from the internet, which is largely undertaken for profit, but the contents of which is sufficiently low in value to be circulated for free among their friends. These friends also have access to portable hard drives, computers, or viewers connected to a DVD player. Both Milene and Noel would be on the outer fringes of this inner circle. The second circle of media users are those with a DVD player at home, who rent content on discs for which they pay by the program, or they may rent a hard drive, for which they pay by the gigabyte. A third circle of media users are the majority of the Cuban population who do not have a DVD player at home and therefore are excluded from everyday nonbroadcast media. Such people are not necessarily excluded from the media culture, as visiting friends or relatives with DVD players is a common, and many of the television series or films that circulate in packets are seen on Cuban television a few weeks or months later. Nevertheless, the policies of the Cuban government in limiting individual ownership or use of media and communications technologies have created significant inequities in the Cuban population; it is the strong hierarchy emerging from very limited access to the internet and computing technologies that allows a thriving trade in the rental of media content, the same media content that many people are copying and circulating for free.

Both Milene and Noel acknowledge that their computers and hard drives were invaluable gifts from close relatives abroad, and smaller peripherals have currency in the networks of sales and gifts through which so many consumer goods arrive in Cuba. Noel has a Spanish friend who regularly visits Cuba, and each visit he gives Noel a newer, larger USB device. Noel's Spanish friend will then take back the USB he had

given Noel on his prior visit, and re-gift that smaller USB drive to another friend in town. In contrast to larger items like hard drives, Noel describes USB drives as being “cheap”: they are easy to give away, lend, or lose without much regret. Digital cameras, cables, adaptors, rechargeable batteries, and recordable DVDs are also circulated among Cubans according to their needs and means. This is just one of the ways in which Cubans are perhaps more conscious than most media consumers of the “double articulation” of media technologies, as they are constantly aware of the material commodities required to support their continued engagement with the flow of media content that arrives speedily from “outside” (*afuera*).

### Isolation versus Connection

The media landscape of Cuba is characterized by a deep connection to transnational circuits of media consumption despite the official isolation of the Cuban media industries and the technological isolation that limits the everyday connectivity of most Cubans to new media and information technologies. Transnational circuits of media and communication are not new—indeed, Cuba’s isolation from the United States is often expressed or reinforced by the messages in letters, phone calls, songs, and videos that have long traveled back and forth in what Lisa Maya Knauer terms “audiovisual remittances” (Knauer 2009; see also Settle 2008 on letters). This deep connection to transnational circuits of media consumption is like the other forms of consumption experienced by Cubans as problematic, and even political, but not in the way that most international journalism has framed analyses of the politics of media consumption in Cuba. Global press attention is focused on the limitations placed on Cubans in their access to media by the effects of U.S. hostility toward Cuban technological development, and also on the Cuban government’s ambivalence toward the social and political consequences of rapid new media access. But such press attention gives the impression that Cubans are effectively isolated from the popular culture shared in the rest of the Americas by mass media systems that are transnational and commercial in nature. This impression is far from the truth; although Cubans complain about the dullness of nationally produced television programs, or about the prohibitive prices of media technologies, at the same time they engage daily in the consumption of transnational media that is either legal and state supported (as in the case of television) or largely informal but clearly tolerated by the state (as in the case of the circulation of media through DVDs and hard drives).

For the most part, Cubans seek to supplement their television consumption with other media, not to access entertainment that is otherwise prohibited via state broadcasting but rather to increase the hours of leisure time spent watching films and television, to “time-shift” their viewing outside the broadcast schedule, to seek out special titles or genres that are not prohibited, and to share media as a social practice by which relationships are maintained and, in some cases, profits are gained. Although there is undoubtedly deeply illegal activity that does take place within the circuits of media sharing I have described above—anti-Castro satire, political documentaries, and

pornography do of course travel along these routes as well—for the most part, media sharing and consumption is not problematic because of the content enjoyed. This is not only true of television but also of the copied and downloaded media that Milene and Noel were sharing with friends; each separately stated very clearly that they engaged in these activities openly, and that the authorities were aware of the circulation of packets and did not prohibit downloading by individual students and IT professionals. As Milene said, such downloading was permitted *para que los muchachos se tranquilizen* [so the young people relax], while Noel insisted that *a nadie le importa todo esto* [nobody cares about this]. My research has suggested that when complaining about media access, most Cubans are troubled not by censorship or political agitation, but by the politics and economics of access to media technologies such as DVD players and personal computers. People express resentments, vulnerabilities, and concerns about the widening gap between those who have access to the growing range of media technologies and those who do not, as what looks like a resurgent middle class of Cubans, who are technologically literate, highly educated, and have disposable income, devote more of their leisure time to media consumption that takes place behind closed doors. Poorer Cubans, through government initiatives that introduced audiovisual technologies to schools and workplaces, are often enjoying identical television content, for example, but to a lesser extent and in a different domestic context.

Residents with well-equipped households are increasingly concerned about theft and home security, and their poorer neighbors are inevitably aware of the material signs of upward mobility that cannot be entirely hidden. Therefore, the economic prosperity required to buy expensive media technologies, and the retreat into privacy that new media consumption practices enable, can be sources of suspicion. But at the same time, the appeal of maximizing the potential to enjoy and schedule leisure and entertainment within the home is consistent with the centrality of the domestic sphere to respectable family life.

Of course, it is in precisely this way that televisions, DVD players, hard drives, and other media technologies can be seen to have a deeply political role within the framework of contemporary socialism. Although all material objects can communicate identities, convey status, trace histories, or embody political and economic tensions, the objects and technologies of electronic and digital media such as televisions, mobile phones, computers, and zip drives have properties that make them doubly communicative. Few objects in modern industrial societies “speak to us” so literally as do media and communication technologies. Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch identify this capacity of media technologies as a “double articulation”: both as technological objects and as transmitters of media they are the domestic technologies by which politics, economics, and culture can be most clearly produced, reproduced, and contested (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, 1). From 2003, when my fieldwork first documented the role and importance of televisions, until 2009, when I interviewed young Cubans about their use of portable hard drives to store and circulate copies of international films and television shows, it has been clear to me that understanding media consumption requires analysis not only of the contents of and audience for media, but also of

the technological properties that have been transforming the everyday practices of Cubans, who have increasing access to media devices.

Perhaps more significantly, the unusual political and economic context within which Cubans access media forms and technologies highlights a politics of media that is contrary to my original expectations of Cuba. Consumers only rarely expressed concern about their access to controversial content; they were more concerned about the widening divide between those who have access to electronic media and those who do not. The emphasis of much existing literature on the role of state censorship and control in Cuban new media policy has overlooked the realities of everyday consumption practices, through which Cubans are increasingly engaged with Latin and U.S. American popular culture. Further, informal economies have been central to everyday life in Cuba both during the height of the Soviet socialist era, and in the period since the collapse of the Soviet Union that has seen a juxtaposition of some market reforms alongside centrally planned policies. In the context of nearly two decades of economic crisis, consumer shortages, and a dual economy, Cuban people use both informal and state-sanctioned networks to acquire goods ranging from groceries to furnishings and domestic appliances. Understanding the informal media economy of Cuba within this broader context helps to explain how and why such consumption of commercial, largely North American, media is largely uncontroversial within Cuban everyday life despite the fraught politics that often dominates discussions of Cuban media policy. As media and communications technologies have been changing dramatically since the mid-twentieth century, the Cuban revolutionary models developed for mass media have not been easily translated to new digital media forms. What emerges is an interesting world in which Cuban consumers are remarkably current with mainstream media culture in the Latin American–Caribbean region, but their experience of such culture takes place within an unusual infrastructure with distinctive routes for the consumption and circulation of media contents and technologies.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this article was funded by a University of Queensland New Staff Start-up Award. The author's fellowship at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland, was funded by an ARC Federation Fellowship, 2008-2011 and by an ARC Discovery Grant 2011-2014.

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