

PAQUETES AS IMPROVISED MEDIA: TRANSNATIONALISM AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION IN HAVANA-MIAMI CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Mediatic gambiarras are alternative and improvised forms of media consumption. They emerge in adverse or restrictive contexts. Signal the need for connection on the part of those who use them. In the island of Cuba, *paquetes*, sets of files containing pop culture content, music, series, US blockbusters, among others, not shown in Cuban media systems, are the most established cultural form of mediatic gambiarra on the socialist island. The article presents the result of a research project carried out between the years 2015 and 2017, based on an ethnographic-inspired methodology, with field interviews and participant observation in the city of Havana, with the purpose of debating different uses of the *paquetes* by consumers and fans of pop culture in the Cuban context. Contradictions about the practices of *paqueteros* — subjects who sell *paquetes* in online and offline network creations — are mapped from the emergence of traces of capitalism in Cuba that pass through the always conflicting relationship between residents in Havana and migrants in Miami in symbolic disputes on the island. The questions raised in the field signal for different matrixes around transnationalism in Latin America, geopolitical issues and point to understandings about the singularities and challenges of contemporary Cuba.

KEYWORDS

cultural consumption, transnationalism, media, Cuba, Latin America

PAQUETES COMO GAMBIARRAS MIDIÁTICAS: TRANSNACIONALISMO E CONSUMO CULTURAL NO CONTEXTO HAVANA-MIAMI

RESUMO

Gambiarras midiáticas são formas alternativas e improvisadas de consumo de mídia. Emergem em contextos adversos ou restritivos. Sinalizam a necessidade de conexão por parte de quem as utiliza. Em Cuba, os *paquetes*, conjuntos de arquivos contendo conteúdos de cultura pop, música, séries, blockbusters norte-americanos, entre outros, não exibidos nos sistemas de mídia cubanos, são a forma cultural mais consagrada de gambiarra midiática na ilha socialista. O artigo apresenta o resultado de um projeto de pesquisa executado entre os anos de 2015 e 2017, a partir de uma metodologia de inspiração etnográfica, com entrevistas de campo e observação participante na cidade de Havana, com a finalidade de debater os diferentes usos dos *paquetes* por consumidores e fãs de cultura pop no contexto cubano. Mapeiam-se as contradições sobre as práticas dos *paqueteros* — sujeitos que vendem os *paquetes* em criações de redes online

e offline — a partir da emergência de traços do capitalismo em Cuba que passam pela relação sempre conflituosa entre residentes em Havana e migrantes em Miami em disputas simbólicas na ilha. As questões levantadas em campo sinalizam para diferentes matrizes em torno do transnacionalismo na América Latina, questões geopolíticas e apontam para os entendimentos sobre as singularidades e desafios de Cuba na contemporaneidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

consumo cultural, transnacionalismo, mídia, Cuba, América Latina

INTRODUCTION

Behind the high wall of a white two-story house with a balcony and wide porch in the Miramar neighborhood of Havana (Cuba), an area filled with mansions and luxury hotels, the researcher¹ and the informant arrive to put in an order for digital files to watch highly successful series like *Game of Thrones* or popular television programs like *The Voice*. These entertainment attractions are not aired on Cuban² state television channels, yet end up being widely watched in private through digital files (*paquetes*) downloaded at *oficinas digitales* (the equivalent of lan houses) and sold at *disquerías* (stores that sell records and DVDs) in Cuba's big cities (such as Havana, Camagüey, and Santiago de Cuba) or through direct sale by *paqueteros* who, through door-to-door sales or by positioning themselves in areas with heavy foot traffic and high visibility in smaller cities, offer a wide variety of digital files with entertainment content. The *paquete digital* or *paquete semanal* business moves \$2,000,000 to \$4,000,000 per year, according to a report by BBC International (San Pedro, 2015), making it one of the most lucrative private economic activities since the Cuban government opened up the economy to private businesses in 2010, giving rise to *cuentapropistas* (self-employed business owners) who have started opening restaurants and B&Bs in private homes and have now extended their reach to the entertainment industry.

In his field research on the intersections of anthropology and economy, Roberto Armengol (2013) highlights that self-employed private business activity has always been present in Cuba, ever since the introduction of the socialist political and economic regime in 1959. *Cuentapropismo* (with this nomenclature) has been regulated since the

¹ In the field research that contributed to this article, one of the authors, Thiago Soares, went to one of the places where *paquetes* are sold in Havana in May 2017, as part of a survey of 16 spaces that were previously visited during 1 month of field research to collect data and interview the social actors involved in the practices of selling and distributing the *paquetes digitales* in Cuba. The field research is a part of the project "Pop Music in Cuba: Political and Media Confrontations".

² In 2017, the television system in Cuba consisted of six Cuban and two international TV channels. All the channels are public-access and are regulated by the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión (ICRT). The channels are: Cubavisión, Canal Habana, Canal Educativo, Canal Educativo 2, Multivisión and Tele Rebelde. They air entertainment, cultural and educational programs, transmissions of political sessions, and sports events. They also air films, Cuban and international series and soap operas (there are Brazilian, Colombian, and Turkish *telenovelas*). The international channels — TeleSUR, from Venezuela, and TV Martí, headquartered in Miami (United States of America) — are also public-access, and both are expanding their coverage in the Cuban territory after a government agreement. Since 2016, the Cuban television networks have broadcasted using a digital signal.

1990s; when the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc fell, the Caribbean island needed to rethink its economic vocation that was centered on government activities and start to include private business activities as well. Official data from the Cuban Ministry of Labor from 2016 registered 579,415 autonomous workers on the island (Agência EFE, 2017), the most common activity, with 61,301 licenses granted, was the “food production and sale” category, which includes *paladares* — restaurants in private homes. The second and third most popular categories were “cargo and passenger transportation” (57,911 licenses) and “renting and leasing houses and spaces” (39,442 licenses). The *paqueteros digitales* fall into the category of “telecommunications agents” (24,736 licenses issued), since the business owner is granted the right to sell top-ups for prepaid phone plans and internet connections and to collect phone bills. The direct contact with the Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba (Etecsa) gives the Cuban entrepreneurs the understanding of how the country’s phone networks and related legal codes work.

Jared Genova (2012) attests that one of the socio-economic impacts of private sector activities in Cuba is the formation of a middle class with access to capital, durable goods, and consumption capacity. Though he does not recognize profound changes to the socialist economy, the author indicates in his study that *cuentapropismo* results in a process of legalizing the “informal” economic activities on the island in order to pay fees and taxes to the State. The *paquetes digitales* market adds to this debate the fact that, even with the legalization of these activities, other unforeseen economic practices emerge that demand a closer look at their regulation. In the field research and the innumerable questions about the *paqueteros*’ appropriateness and honesty, a moral dimension to the private activities in Cuba appears, insofar as the *paquetes digitales* dealer is also associated with privileges and the formation of informal norms of control and market strategies that work without the knowledge of the State.

During the 2 years spent on the project “Pop Music in Cuba: Political and Media Confrontations”, which debated the dynamics of the consumption of pop culture attractions on the island of Cuba, different stages of understanding the dynamics of the phenomenon of the *paquetes digitales* were proposed, as all the studied phenomena addressed the dynamic of the consumption of the *paquetes*.

In the first investigation (Soares, 2016c), beginning with the relation of a Cuban drag queen who is a fan of the singer Lady Gaga to the context of both the gay scene in Havana and the dynamics of gender present in the policies of gender and sexuality at the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, the *paquetes digitales* appeared as a means through which both the drag queen in question and the fans of English pop music in Cuba and DJs at clubs and show houses are in contact with American and Latin music on the singles charts around the world. Albums, music videos, and recordings of live performances not just of Lady Gaga, but of other pop music artists as well, are offered and sought out via the *paquetes digitales*.

In the second investigation (Soares & Lima, 2018), some pop music fans showed resistance to the *paquetes*. Through three in-depth interviews with the main fan of the American singer Madonna on the island, who is also responsible for the Facebook page

“Madonna Cuba”, the way that the generational aspect modulated the relations of consumption of the *paquetes* was discussed. With young Cuban fans of Lady Gaga, ages 15 to 22 years old, there was no mention or criticism of the quality of the available material; in the case of the Madonna fans (older, in the age range of 30 to 40 years old), the *paquetes* were rejected for the low quality definition of some files (especially video files) and for the fact that the songs are not in order according to their listing on the albums, but instead are collections of the artist’s top hits, in the form of singles and without the “logic” that the artist had decided. The quality of the *paquetes* is highlighted as an element of distinction among the *paqueteros* and the process of loyalty to them, as found by investigating the consumption of series and blockbuster films in the Cuban context (Soares, 2016b), spawning recommendation networks that cause significant differentiations both with the *paqueteros* and with those who take the *paquetes* door-to-door.

It is not only the consumption and circulation of American or highly successful pop culture products that the *paquetes digitales* serve. Reguetón — a music genre that is highly controversial in the context of Cuba due to its glorification of consumerism, luxury cars, women, and a life of capitalist values — has also become central to the success of the *paquetes*. One incident involving the censorship of a reguetón music video by the Instituto Cubano de Rádio y Televisión (ICRT) on public television in Cuba and its wide circulation on *paquetes digitales* (Pereira & Soares, 2017) demonstrates that Cuban music, which is outside of the standards enshrined by the State while facing circulation difficulties in the official media systems, gains an important place in the dissemination of the *paquetes*.

Even when artists have shows in Cuba (in the case of the performances that celebrated the return of the relations between Cuba and the United States and the visit of then-president Barack Obama to the socialist island in 2016, with shows by Major Lazer and the Rolling Stones), producers need to make albums and songs by the artist available on the *paquetes digitales* with the purpose of popularizing the artists among younger listeners. This was highlighted in an article about the popularization of the group Major Lazer at the time of their Havana show in March 2016 at the Tribuna Antiimperialista, in front of the then-newly reopened Embassy of the United States (Soares, 2016a).

From this set of inferences about the dynamics of the *paquetes digitales*, the premise emerges that in the face of a media system supported by the State, Cuban citizens overcome restrictions on international pop culture products by developing alternative methods of media consumption. The *paquetes*, packages of files downloaded from the internet and sold through *oficinas digitales* in Havana and distributed throughout the island, are the principal mechanism of two types of media strategies, understanding these “strategies” on the basis of Braga’s report (2006) that debates the uses, incorporations, attributions, and alternatives of social actors in the face of media offerings in socio-historical periods. Media strategies in contexts of asymmetrical power and social inequalities are gestures that point to alternative consumption of media. It is in this direction that we consider the *paquetes* to be “MacGyvered” or improvised media, since it calls to mind improvised constructions, deviation, and illicit purposes. The debate about media

improvisations lies in the recognition of precariousness and improvisation as characteristics of this framework and “can be understood as conceptual vectors that are able to boost the capacity of understanding the technical phenomena and their political and aesthetic repercussions” (Messias & Mussa, 2020, p. 174). However, the improvisation has “the potential to express deviations and contingencies with both the sophisticated and the more precarious technologies; or, more precisely, to show just how precarious and uncertain the connections or links (Sodré, 2014) that bring these technologies together” (Messias & Mussa, 2020, p. 175).

Understanding the *paquete semanal* as a media improvisation points to more than its uses in internet consumption on the island of Cuba. The dynamics of production and circulation of these *paquetes* reveal a network that extends to the relation between Cuban migrants in Miami (United States) and residents in Havana (Cuba), private businesses on the island and business models that demonstrate the transversal ways that advertising is inserted into the socialist context of Cuba.

PAQUETEROS IN THE BALANCE BETWEEN FASCINATION AND SUSPICION

The debate about the *paquetes digitales* in academic articles within the project “Pop Music in Cuba: Political and Media Confrontations” always arises from reports of interviewees’ experiences or from individuals referring to the way that they acquire their pop culture products through consulting *paqueteros*. In a field research visit to Havana in May of 2017, the researcher used participant observation as the research method on the trip to an appointment with the intent to acquire a *paquete* and interview the owner of the *oficina digital*. The participant observation was an appropriate method for the investigation of the *paquetes* because the topic is not openly discussed by individuals that practice the activity, which also brings up aspects linked to the clandestine nature and ethical debates of the individuals.

In the beginning of the investigation, the researcher considered using in-depth interviews with *paqueteros* in the city of Havana, however, the interview would present a set of statements and practices that could hide the clandestine dimension that exists in the daily activities. The first stage was to form a network of Cuban informants to get in contact with a *paquetero*. In all of the investigations carried out throughout the 2 years of research, Cuban informants were fundamental to forming complex pictures of the relations of consumption of cultural products on the socialist island.

Through the network of informants established in 2016 during the prior investigation about the consumption of pop music, D. P.³, a nightclub frequenter, was added as a “friend” on the social network Facebook. Between the two trips to Havana, there were around 10 months of interaction between members of the research project in Brazil and the informant, who was a journalism student at the University of Habana at the time.

³ Due to the sensitive nature of the topics and based on the recommendations of the Committee of Research Ethics of Applied Social Sciences at the Federal University of Pernambuco and of the editors of this publication, all the names of the individuals and locations are fictitious in order to protect the identities of the members of this investigation.

Based on their recommendation, we were introduced to P. A., one of the largest and most famous *oficinas digitales* in the Miramar neighborhood that also serves the Playa neighborhood, in Havana. It is a two-story residence, and in the living room the *paquetero* F., 23 years old, helps clients who come in from the neighborhood or via cellphone or landline phone. A sign that says “please confirm what was copied because we do not accept returns or copies” hangs over a barred window where requests are made to F., who is assisted by another “employee”, his 16-year-old brother P. Both work at a desk beside the barred window in a type of improvised office in the living room of their house. Beneath the window on the left is a small side table with four folders on it. In these folders there are lists of available titles, sorted by genre. The content of the *paquetes* is so extensive and diverse that it has been called the “Cuban YouTube”⁴.

Through the process of obtaining the *paquete*, a link between the client and the *paquetero* is developed, establishing the recommendation networks. This type of relationship was noticeable when the *paquetero* F. saw D. and informed them that all the episodes of *La Voz Kids* or *The Voice Kids – Brasil* had arrived. F. was surprised by the presence of D.’s friend, then still unknown. F. asked who they were and said that, if they wanted to become a regular client, he would give them episodes of the series *The Walking Dead* for free. An informal system of word-of-mouth recommendations and client loyalty is evident, but D. explained that they were Brazilian researchers who would be in Havana for only 1 month doing research on the *paquetes*.

D. was fundamental to mediating the relationships established with the group of *paqueteros*. The *paquetero*’s trust allowed him to transfer access, data, and dialogue about the practices. The presence of the researcher in the environment sparked both curiosity and suspicion. Details of the research were not given, and the explanation was limited to saying that the investigation was to watch pop culture products “like Cubans watch them”. This line had, in principle, placed the researcher outside the investigated group, but at the same time showed that they were interested in the enacted dynamics of consumption.

F. was interested in knowing what would be said about the *paquetes* since the Cuban government, according to them, “criminalizes the activity”. The *paquetero* said that they needed to be paid to appear in the study, but it was explained that funding for this was not available and that it was not the purpose of the research. We expressed the importance of understanding the ways that Cubans connect with global pop culture products, their dynamics of consumption, and political and aesthetic implications.

We chose P. A. as the focus of the field research about the *paquetes* in Havana because of its centrality in an area considered to be for “rich people” in the Cuban capital. Contrary to popular imagination and confirmed by Genova (2012), there are social classes in Cuba and neighborhoods made up of government workers, *cuentalpropistas* (local entrepreneurs), and residents of the island who receive foreign currency (money) from relatives who live abroad. In informal conversations with various interviewees, F. was always mentioned as an important *paquetero* because of his ample catalogue of

⁴ Cubans’ preference for the *paquete* can be seen in NoticiasCubanes Cuba (2017).

products and also for being a chic *paquete*. We came to understand that “chic” refers to his house, which is quite an imposing residence even by the more well-to-do standards of a neighborhood like Miramar. F.’s appearance also stood out: he is a good-looking man who dresses well and is very polite. Though he garners compliments, F. is also the target of suspicions, especially regarding how his business has grown to such a wide range of operations.

In 2017, F. fulfilled an average of 30 orders of *paquetes* per day, generating a profit of €150 per day and a total of approximately €4,500 per month⁵. This is a large amount of money for any European country, and even more so in Cuba, where services like education and healthcare are free and inclusive and private business activity needs to be State-sanctioned. Included in this amount are commissions for the *paqueteros* who do door-to-door business and payments to security guards who, according to the informant, need to “guard the territory” — he was referring to the practice of keeping the area where they do business free of competition. Security guards and the “eyes” report on the activities of other *paqueteros*, creating precedent for the formation of socio-technical networks based on informal frameworks of control, loyalty, and fidelity in a market that gives rise to micropolitics that regulate specific actions by groups of capital holders in the city of Havana.

Acting within a network and monitoring *paqueteros* like F. in neighborhoods in Havana raises hypotheses and the suspicions of residents and consumers of the *paquetes* about the methods and origins of the materials⁶. The materiality of the networks and their connections spark communicational flows that unfold in:

- the way that the *paqueteros* have internet access in Cuba, a country that suffers from a double embargo (economic and also the digital implications) — from pirating networks and reconfiguring the materialities of media, creating “MacGyvered media”, or improvised artifacts for the consumption and circulation of media;
- the online and offline networks established among the extremely popular and well-recognized *paqueteros* of Havana with the media businesses of migrants in Miami, forming a system that reproduces the agency of the United States in the media trends of Latin America and demonstrating the recurrence and even the incentive of media activities that damage the sovereignty of Cuba.

The connections among *paquetes*, *paqueteros*, and the consumption of contemporary cultural products by Cuban residents, stemming from the relationships with Cuban migrants in the United States, lies in the particularities and inflections that the concept of transnationalism has in the Latin American context. Transnationalism is understood as the involvement of migrants, their networks of social relations established in a territory or between communication flows on the internet and the local and international institutions that support these relationships developed beyond the borders of cities or states (Portes et al., 1999; Schiller et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2009). Transnationalism

⁵ These are the gross amounts and it is estimated that the *cuentapropista* fees paid to the State are around 70% of this amount. Informally, there are many ways of getting around the full payment.

⁶ *Paqueteros* such as F. receive attractions extremely quickly. For example, the 2017 Grammy Awards, even though not broadcast on Cuban television stations, was already available for sale 1 hour after its closing when shown on worldwide television.

includes actions that range from the remittance of money between countries — in which the communication exchanges via information and communication technology (ICT) support the flow both with money and information — to the movement of goods and people necessary to carry out these exchanges. Transnationalism consequently includes the flow of cultural goods that inevitably circulate among these networks, whose aim is to subvert the limitations imposed by the precarious conditions of life and to combine strategies that allow for the transit and the cultural consumption entailed.

For Portes et al. (1999), the study of the web of transactions employed in transnational flows must start with understanding the stories and activities of individuals, thus, from data collection and individual interviews. This makes it possible to outline the networks that facilitate transnational migration, as well as to identify the elements that make up the networks, such as the chosen forms of communication whether via internet or telephone, the methods of exchanging goods or payments, and the routes and the movements involved. We highlight that by “transnational routes” we mean a constant exchange of information and experiences between the country of origin and the new place where the migrant lives. This exchange happens through ICT that, in turn, makes a double local experience: from the daily life of those who stayed and with the lives of those who remain in transit (Zanforlin, 2015).

If, for Castells (1996), the new technologies are the epicenter of contemporary transnational networks, the *paquetes* can be seen as artifacts that realize the desire to belong to the global capitalist system materialized by the consumption of cultural products produced by an industry that is blocked from Cuba and reinforces Cuba’s exclusion from this same system. In this sense, Appadurai (1996/2004) understands that migrations and diasporas, together with communication technologies, represent the essential distinctions of contemporaneity, with the experience of the consumption of globalized culture being a signifier of the changes found in the framework of identity and spaciality. For the author, the complexity of global cultural flows can be better understood using the concept of “scapes”: a *mediascape* is what most approximates the experience of the *paqueteros* and the *paquetes* in Cuba. From this perspective, the *mediascapes* depict an experience of cultural consumption that goes beyond the locality or the Nation-State, confirming that the *paqueteros*’ experience of diaspora can be viewed from the transnational paradigm that brings together information, human mobility, and cultural consumption from the cultural flows that are amplified by globalization.

On the other hand, in an attempt to make a critical revision of the concept of transnationalism, Feldman-Bianco and Schiller (2011) point out the need to be attentive to the continual restructuring of capital and its nucleus as a matrix of social relations in progress and in dispute. In other words, it is necessary to situate the studies about transnationalism from the point of view of a world that is connected by multiple networks of unequal power, where the interests of national elites overlay state institutional ties, to world financial institutions and imperial powers with actors in the social, political, and economic conditions that compose the profile of migration, its radicalization and the transnational connection. This is to say that, in the scope of the studies about

transnationalism, there is an urgent need to reapproach the political economy and social relations in order to set a direction that is opposed to the studies that celebrate the “trips, tourism, consumption, and movements of capital, people and signs in a world without borders” (Feldman-Bianco & Schiller, 2011, p. 36). The authors point out that different case studies reveal that the transnational social camps of migrants take shape and are part of the restructuring, connection, and global repositioning of the particular places and institutions among them, which would include reclaiming the use of the term “imperialism”. Having said this, we point to the structure of the flows of migrants and cultural goods between the United States and Cuba as a sign to notice forms of a diffuse, yet potent, presence of desires, ways of life, and consumption styles as a connection of the relation between cultural consumption, migrations and strategies of the sovereignty between Nation-States. The authors believe that the idea of thinking of migrants as uprooted from their states of origin is mistaken, and that actually in the current context of capitalist restructuring, the migrants become active agents in contemporary transformations on the local, national, and global scale through their transnational connections.

We will now turn our discussion to unpacking the communicational flows (internal and external) with the purpose of making observations about political and aesthetic disputes between exiled and current Cuban residents in the circulation of media products on the socialist island.

INTERNET ACCESS AND NETWORK PIRACY

Though the focus of the investigation from the experiential point of view has been the F. *paquete* in Miramar, in the scope of this study we visited 16 locations that sell *paquetes digitales* in the city of Havana: six in Vedado, four in Havana Vieja, four in Miramar/Playa, and two in Centro Havana. In all of them, the mediator introduced the researcher, who then asked questions to the owners or employees working at the locations. The questions tried to clarify the main point of doubt about the procedures of downloading the *paquete* files, since the internet across the island of Cuba is unstable and expensive, making it difficult to download large files. It was apparent that all the interviewees felt uncomfortable talking about this subject. However, two *paqueteros*, who remained anonymous, decided to reveal how they access high speed internet in the city of Havana, bypassing the public-access internet system regulated by the Etecsa.

According to one of them, since 2001, Cuban technophiles have set up offline networks that span across all of Havana. Through a combination of Wi-Fi antennas and cables hidden along the tops of houses and buildings, it links up around 9,000 computers just in the Cuban capital (Payão, 2015). The result of these antennas and cables is a network called “Snet” (“streetnet”). The main reason for the construction of this network is trading information, file sharing (especially the files in the *paquetes*), and playing online games. There are rules of behavior and etiquette on the Snet: pornography is expressly prohibited, as is spreading anti-government political content.

In parallel to the formation of offline networks, public Wi-Fi has been offered across Cuba since 2015. In September of 2017, there were 317 connection points in the main cities. With the arrival of the internet in smaller cities like Gaspar, a city of 7,500 residents situated on the east side of the country, engineers and youth created an internal network called Gaspar Social that is like a type of local Facebook with an educational intent (Agência France Press, 2017). Since 2015, with the significant increase in the number of cellular devices on the island, another system of mobile networks to share entertainment content has become extremely popular among Cuban youth: Bluetooth (Marreiro, 2013). Due to the high cost to connect, Cubans share their main entertainment through offline systems. It is, however, from the offline networks like Snet and bluetooth connection that the information and content that form the *paquetes* is spread.

Home internet connection in Cuba is reserved for scientists, military members, doctors, and journalists, which who are considered strategic areas by the Cuban government to work in strategic areas. There is network piracy for private use in these sectors mainly to download material for the principle Cuban *paqueteros*. The two *paqueteros* who were interviewed agreed to explain how their businesses have high-speed connections: it comes from sharing the internet from individuals who are part of the privileged groups with internet access on the island.

The collection of videos, songs, photos, and text files is compiled by the *paqueteros* and circulated around the island person-to-person, spreading rapidly from Havana to more distant places in less than a week, “forming what is known in tech lingo as a sneaker-net: a network that transmits data via the soles of a shoe, bus, horse, or any other form of content transportation” (Martínez, 2017, para. 14).

There is a two-pronged debate in Cuba about why government sectors “turn a blind eye” to the digital practices of the youth. The first thesis, naturally, is that access to the internet is limited on the island mainly because of the economic embargo imposed by the United States, whose restrictions make purchasing electronic equipment extremely expensive. In this way, young Cubans can “feel” the effects of the embargo on their cultural pleasures and entertainment when they do not have internet access. The second theory is that allowing youths’ apolitical digital practices to happen dampens the urge that young Cubans may have to leave the island. Allowing these practices to exist without damaging the wider norms of media regulation in the country is one way to create a favorable environment for Cuban youth to identify with the socialist government. It is important to point out that, in fact, the question of internet access in Cuba has faced difficulties, especially political difficulties, in its expansion. As the main companies linked to the digital culture sectors, for example, Facebook and Google, are American, there are political obstacles in the ways that digital environments are constructed on the island.

Be it from an imprudent program from the American agency of international cooperation, USAid, that sought to weaken Fidel Castro’s regime through the service ZunZuneo - a type of “Cuban Twitter” that used

counterrevolutionary text messages - or from a wider perception of social media as a tool of dissidents, the authorities have traditionally been cautious in relation to the internet. (Grant, 2017, para. 30)

In 2017, Google reached an agreement with Etcsa about storing the online content of sites like YouTube and Gmail on servers in Cuba to improve local access. However, there is still a lack of trust from the Cuban authorities towards unrestricted access to the internet, both for companies from the United States and for Cuban citizens.

BETWEEN MIAMI AND HAVANA

F. browses through the *paquete* and saves the indicated files onto an external hard drive made in China — this is the content of the *paquete* digital of the week. Inside each file directory there is a selection of image and video ads alongside the real content. A Cuban user may accidentally open the ads while browsing the files, and the *paquete* makes a profit with the ads. Each *paquetero* mixes in advertising content with the content, charging according to the reach of the number of their clients. Incorporating ad content into the *paquetes* is the clearest connection between the *paqueteros* in Havana, like F., and digital content agencies located in Miami (United States), the stronghold of the largest Cuban community outside of the socialist island, a large part of whom have family and connections with people still living in Cuba.

The content is downloaded through the pirated internet on the island and circulated through both the *paquetes* and offline networks. According to countless *paqueteros*, there are clients interested in both the attractions of the *paquete* (*novelas*, films, series) and the classified ads (car sales, jobs, clothes, animals, electronics) for sale or trade — something that is not published in traditional Cuban media. One of the most famous ad content listings is Revolico (<https://www.revolico.com/>), a Cuban version of Craigslist⁷ (“O efeito da lista de Craig”, 2016), a site that publishes short ads to sell or trade different types of goods and services: cars, jobs, clothes, animals, electronics, among others. The problem is that people need to have internet access to browse Revolico, which is expensive and difficult on the island. Thus a “downloaded” version of Revolico is loaded onto the *paquete* like an ad listing that can be viewed offline.

The perspective of having content produced in Miami that is also counterrevolutionary generated even more distrust of the *paquete* in the eyes of the Cuban government. Besides being “out of control” and promoting American culture, the artistic and intellectual level of the *paquetes* is frequently attacked as being “low” since it is full of American blockbusters and Mexican *novelas*. There is not a consensus about the legality of selling individual *paquetes*, but stories of youths going to jail for selling *paquetes*

⁷ Craigslist is a network of online communities that publishes free announcements of various types to users: from job offers to erotic content. The service was started in 1995 by Craig Newmark, in San Francisco, California, and has expanded to over 450 cities around the world.

are constantly passed around⁸. Cuban authorities tried to create a direct rival to the *paquetes* called “maletín” or “mochila” (briefcase or backpack). Instead of blockbusters, it had classic films, traditional music, and educational material. Nicknamed the “anti-paquete”, it is considered a failure, as this type of content is already widely available on Cuban television.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From the cultural consumption practices of pop culture products by Cuban individuals, we propose recognizing the existence of media improvisations. In other words, the act of creating an improvised media solution, from the apparatus of material culture, is an alternative intervention that can also be defined as a “technique” or “reappropriation of material” that is adopted in a context of restriction. Media improvisations are symptoms of possible adjustments to access media through proposed adaptations inside of technical horizons. Bouffleur (2006) views such behavior as immediate projective thinking, determined by the momentary circumstance. As a process, the improvisation can be considered an alternative form of design and political relation to the restrictive contexts.

Along this path, the concept of transnationalism stresses that migrant practices can be seen both as potentials of resistance and as an imperialist reaffirmation (Feldman-Bianco & Schiller, 2011), from investigating links among groups with multiple economic, cultural, political, and family connections, and the disputes of the national imagination in progress. In a context of a real and symbolic dispute like the one on screen between Cuba and the United States, the transnational practices materialized in the *paquetes* can be viewed as more subtle ways of exerting influence by mobilizing feelings and imagination via the cultural consumption of lifestyles that celebrate consumption and capitalism. The migrants and the *paquetes* can be seen as intermediaries since, in an ambiguous relationship on the one hand, they allow Cubans to partake in the global experience of pop culture consumption, and on the other hand they also confront the reality of the embargo and the limitations on circulation imposed by Cuba. Beyond identifying the transnational practice of cultural consumption, ideas of “everyday cosmopolitanism” or “tactical cosmopolitanism” are evoked (Vertovec, 2009, p. 32), to consider ways of acting and being cosmopolitan in the presented context, that is, the notion of cultural competency acquired by the transnational migrant in the way they get around and transit through limitations. The notion of cultural competency is linked to the social capital that the migrant strengthens through contact networks that are reworked in their own migratory experience and through the possibilities that this experience redefines in their relation to the local culture. Thus, F. represents the returned migrant from the relations constructed during his migratory experience in Miami, expanding to his activity in the local Cuban “cultural market” sustained by transnational living. The association with the concept of “cosmopolitanism” appears, then, not from the classic definition of “an

⁸ One of the *paqueteros* said that they were detained for selling pornographic content, which is, in fact, illegal in Cuba.

opening for difference and otherness” (Zanforlin, 2018, p. 34), but as an acquired cultural competency — an ability to deal with a particular system of meanings and prepare for managing the consumption of “imported” cultural goods, in the analyzed case.

We propose, then, that media improvisations have a history in the Cuban context. From residential satellite dishes with the goal of capturing radio and TV signals from Florida (United States), to sharing TV signals also captured by satellite dishes, the alternative ways of consuming pop culture products in Cuba involves the relation of citizens and migrants to media improvisations. In the era of digital culture, new media improvisations are created: from digital network piracy to sharing signals, the *paquete semanal* is the most established media improvisation in Cuba. Though it faces strong resistance from the government and the most intellectual spheres of Cuban society, it continues to be the main form of consumption and entertainment in the country.

Translation: Alisa Rae Wilhelm

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