

The Sovietization of Cuban Journalism. The Impact of Foreign Economy Dependency on Media Structures in a Post-Soviet Era

La soviétización del periodismo cubano. El impacto de la dependencia económica extranjera en la estructura de los medios en una era postsoviética

A Sovietização do jornalismo cubano. O impacto da dependência econômica externa nas estruturas midiáticas em uma era pós-soviética

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Abstract: This paper challenges the assumption that foreign influence on a media system takes place mainly through foreign aid campaigns. In order to do so, it looks at the way in which Cuba's dependency on the Soviet Union has influenced the sovietisation of Cuban journalism through qualitative interviews. This is not to dismiss the importance of overt and covert foreign aid campaigns. However, the findings reveal that economic and ideological dependency had a lasting impact on the de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism in terms of structure, intellectual freedom and journalistic practice.

Keywords:

foreign aid; economic dependency; sovietisation; de-professionalisation.

Resumen: Este artículo desafía la idea de que la influencia extranjera en un sistema mediático tiene lugar principalmente a través de campañas de cooperación internacional. Para ello, examina a través de entrevistas cualitativas la influencia de los lazos de dependencia de Cuba con la Unión Soviética en la soviétización del periodismo cubano. Esto no significa que haya que ignorar la importancia de campañas extranjeras, públicas o encubiertas. Los datos revelan que la dependencia económica e ideológica ha tenido un

impacto duradero en la desprofesionalización del periodismo cubano en cuanto a estructura, libertad intelectual y práctica periodística.

Palabras Clave:

cooperación internacional; dependencia económica; sovietaización; desprofesionalización.

Resumo: Este artigo desafia a ideia de que a influência estrangeira em um sistema de mídia ocorre principalmente por meio de campanhas de cooperação internacional. Para tanto, analisa através de entrevistas qualitativas a influência dos laços de dependência de Cuba com a União Soviética na sovietaização do jornalismo cubano. Isso não significa que devemos ignorar a importância de campanhas estrangeiras, públicas ou secretas. Os dados revelam que a dependência econômica e ideológica teve um impacto duradouro na desprofissionalização do jornalismo cubano em termos de estrutura, liberdade intelectual e prática jornalística.

Palavras-chave:

cooperação internacional; dependência econômica; sovietaização; desprofissionalização.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship between foreign economic dependency and the de-professionalisation of journalism by looking at the case of Soviet influence in Cuba. Academic debates on media and foreign aid in Cuba have focused on two fronts: United States (often covert) campaigns of ‘democracy promotion’ and foreign funding on independent digital media projects. This work aims at examining the roots of foreign influence on the post-revolutionary Cuban media structure from a historical perspective, avoiding the temptations of presentism and technological determinism that often permeate the analysis of foreign aid in the Island. The main argument is that current debates on media and foreign aid in Cuba are missing a key point: the way in which economic dependency can foster more subtle ways of interfering in journalistic structures and professional practices. The goal of this article is to examine the impact of Cuba’s

dependency on the Soviet Union has had on the bureaucratisation and de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism.

According to Oller Alonso and Oliveira (2016: 133), the characteristics of the Soviet media model were incorporated in a context of Cold War in which the country felt diplomatically isolated. This moment coincided with a post-revolutionary wave of institutionalisation in which the leaders had to build a radically new political and productive structure. Adopting the Soviet model meant embracing a Marxist-Leninist focus on empowering the working class, which was coherent with Che Guevara's idea of constructing a 'new man' through education, mobilisation and socialisation (Siebert, Peterson and Schram, 1954). The mass media was conceived as a useful channel for spreading the new economic, institutional and ideological bases of the revolutionary state.

The paper is organised in five sections. The first part discusses western attempts to influence Cuban media and to use communicational channels as means to advance democracy-promotion goals. While the importance of these efforts needs to be taken into account, the paper argues that it is impossible to understand the lack of success of western projects without examining the influence of Soviet media structures in the de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism. In fact, I argue that the sovietisation of the Cuban media shaped the limits of journalists' agency. This work takes a Discourse Theoretical approach to the analysis of 25 qualitative interviews with Cuban journalist who have worked within the boundaries of the institutional structure. The main focus is the process by which some journalists become disengaged from a bureaucratic oppressive system and claim a disenfranchisement of journalism from the state. The findings and analysis section show journalists' accounts the sovietisation of the Cuban in terms of structure, intellectual freedom and journalistic practice. Finally, the conclusion opens new spaces of debate about the way in which foreign funding of independent digital media projects can help overcoming the Soviet structure of the Cuban media through the promotion of non-bureaucratic spaces for debate.

2. Foreign Aid and Democracy Promotion in Cuba

Cuba has been experiencing a systemic crisis since the fall of the Berlin wall, reinforced by the death of Fidel Castro and the re-institutionalization (or ‘updating’) of state structures. These changes have come with a decline of social consensus and a deterioration of citizens’ trust in the official media (García Lorenzo and Pérez, 2012; Marrero, 2013; Elizalde, 2014; Garcia Santamaria, 2017). This crisis is influenced by the loss of communicational hegemony of the state, which now has to compete with independent media projects and with offline structures of mass distribution of content, such as the ‘weekly package’, or ‘el paquete semanal’. However, the main problem is the weakness of Soviet media structures to adapt to new challenges in a context of de-professionalisation. In fact, I argue that US covert campaigns and foreign funding of independent media outlets exist because of the weakness and deficiencies of the Cuban institutional media. They provide tools that fill information and communication gaps, creating non-institutionalised zones of exchange between social actors that allow the de-bureaucratisation of public debate.

The United States has identified the weaknesses of the official media (Elizalde, 2014) and attempted to fill informational and communicational gaps. US-funded of Radio Marti programming started in 1985, TV Marti in 1992 and the country has boosted the creation of a dissident civil society through the USAID-Cuba programme, funded in 1996. In recent decades, several USAID projects in the United States have supported oppositional blogs and microblogging as a means of building a more resilient ‘civil society’ (Henken and Ritter, 2014; Kornbluh, 2013). For instance, AP revealed in 2015 that USAID was behind ZunZuneo, a social messaging network also known as ‘the Cuban Twitter’ that was expected to spark a ‘Cuban Spring’. Another sustained foreign aid initiative has come from Radio Netherland Wereldomroep (RNW) a Dutch NGO aimed at strengthening democracy and good governance. While US campaigns in Cuba aimed at coordinating a clearly dissident movement, the RNW project hired Cuban journalists and bloggers that could foster mild criticism from within.

These foreign aid campaigns have been focused on opening up alternative spaces for debate outside the institutional media system and have therefore remained highly peripheral

in terms of reach and audience. That is why it is important to examine more subtle ways in which foreign powers have shaped the media and journalistic culture in the Island. This article argues that any analysis should attempt to understand the Cuban media system as a whole, examining not only the impact of foreign funding on digital media projects but also the Soviet structure in which the institutional media operate. According to this view, the main challenge consists on deconstructing the internal Soviet structures of the media, rather than taking for granted the success of external efforts to foster democracy-promotion through foreign aid campaigns.

3. Methodology

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory has been criticised for overly focusing on an abstract articulation of discourses, '*bypassing the moment of subjectivity*' (Howarth, 2008: 185) and undermining the ability of social agents to consciously construct discourses that challenge the hegemonic order. This paper takes a Discourse Theoretical approach to the analysis of interviews with Cuban journalists. The goal of conducting interviews was to understand the way in which Cuba's alliance with and dependency from a foreign power, the Soviet Union, has permeated not only media structures but also organisational and professional practices in the Island. This is essential for understanding the role of journalists in relocating symbolic meaning –whether reinforcing, questioning, or challenging the hegemonic Soviet model of the Cuban media.

The interviews were conducted during several research stays at the Faculty of Communication, University of Havana, between 2013 and 2017. The selection of the 25 interviewees responded to both a theoretical and a snowball sampling strategy, which was useful for identifying interviewees that were both knowledgeable and willing to speak with their own voice, going beyond Party slogans. The interviews were conducted with leading practitioners and scholars from different generations, ranging from their mid-twenties to their early seventies, and who were working –at least in their view– within the limits of belonging that were set by Fidel Castro's 'Words to the Intellectuals'. While the sample of the interviews is not representative of the journalistic community as a whole, it sheds light

in the understanding of journalists' account of Soviet influence in a specific life-world setting.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section analyses the Soviet impact on the Cuban media through the accounts of journalists that have worked within the institutional media and academic setting in the Island. The data shows four main sources of impact: (1) on media structures, (2) on intellectual freedom and (3) on the de-professionalisation of journalism. It is important to recognize that these categories are not clear-cut, but they often overlap in a vicious circle by which bureaucratic structures permeate the way newsrooms operate and foster a de-professionalisation of journalism that, in turn, disempowers practitioners. Therefore, journalists lack the necessary autonomy for changing both the way they report and the broader structure of the media system.

5. The sovietisation of Cuban media structures

The following lines examine the earliest way of Soviet influence through the early political and intellectual articulation of the Revolution. There is widespread scholarly agreement on the fact that the original source of political legitimacy in Cuba at the time of the Revolution was nationalism, rather than socialism. The confrontation with the United States in the early 1960s would have laid the groundwork for a revolutionary ideology that was much more 'radical' than in the early days and initiated the path towards the sovietisation of all spheres of social life (Guerra, 2012; López Segrera, 2011; Romero, 2008). In fact, Draper (1965: 71) provocatively argues that Fidel Castro reached power with one ideology and maintained control through a different one.

With the revolutionary victory in 1959, the main sources of public communication were narrowed down to Fidel Castro, and the private media faced professional, ideological and material pressures until the 1965 nationalisation of all media outlets. After its creation in 1965, the Communist Party of Cuba (CCP) assumed full responsibility for '*all matters of ideology*', appointing editors and taking control over media content and organisational structures (Castro Ruz, 1965). The Cuban media were put at the service of 'the Revolution', something that came at the cost of 'external regulation' (*regulación externa*) (García Luis

(2013). In this context, journalism was reduced to an instrument of the ideological struggle and journalists were put at the service of collective political, rather than professional goals (Marrero, 2006; García Luis, 2013). The external control of the media is attributed to three main motives: the fear of losing communicational hegemony, the need for protecting 'the Revolution' from foreign propaganda and the adoption of Soviet-like bureaucratic structures.

While Cuban artists, writers and filmmakers pushed for recognition of their intellectual independence early on in 'the Revolution', leading the so-called 'Cultural Polemics', journalists never enjoyed the same degree of autonomy (Leyva and Somohano, 2008; Kumaraswami, 2009; Gordon-Nesbitt, 2014). They lacked not only the clout and leverage that artists had, both inside the Island and internationally, but were not even recognised as an independent professional and intellectual body (García Luis, 2013). In fact, some leading researchers argue that the media remains the most 'Soviet' institution in Cuba (Guanche, 2008; García Luis, 2013).

The interviews reveal that, despite current consensus on changing media structures (Elizalde, 2014; Garcés, 2013; Garcia Santamaria, 2017), there are visible divisions between more 'conservative' or 'orthodox' points of view, and more 'radical' or 'revolutionary' ones. The interviewees who see themselves as 'true revolutionaries' claim that the real obstacles to change are the persistence of old mentalities, as well as bureaucratic organisational structures. This is the view of an editor who works for an institutional newspaper:

There have been many calls for change; there has been an increasing awareness among practitioners, politicians and citizens about the need to change Cuban journalism, about the need for Cuban journalism to reengage with reality. But in practice, this hasn't happened because the structural conditions in which journalists operate have not changed. It's a structural problem, not just a matter of discursively claiming change. Yes, let's change. But, what are the real conditions that will allow us to change? We can't change within the current structure. (RB22)

Similarly, a senior subeditor considers changes underway to be just ‘palliative measures’, and advocates for some degree of radicalism: ‘If we [journalists] don’t commit ourselves to a radical change, able to solve the structural problems, we’ll take some steps forward, and then go back to usual’ (RC16). His colleague goes one step further and affirms that the Cuban media model needs radical, structural changes: ‘In my opinion, I think we need another Revolution. Maybe I’m too heretical for saying this, but I think we need another Revolution, able to change the current structures’, he contends (RB22).

Despite the permanence of bureaucratic organisational structures, the data suggests that younger generations are more likely to defy the Soviet influence on Cuban journalism (RC19). The ideological gap between young and senior revolutionaries and the former’s attempts to resist bureaucratic practices can be seen in this independent blogger’s account:

I will talk about myself. I was formed and educated by the Revolution. I was a militant in the Communist Youth League until I was 28. However, I won’t be a member of the Communist Party because I don’t believe in the way in which the Party is doing certain things. It’s not that I don’t believe in the Party itself, it’s just that I don’t believe in certain practices. My party, my struggle, is called [name of his blog]. I think I contribute more to my community by publishing critical articles and making analysis about the situation there, than by meeting once a month in an air-conditioned office with forty Party members of the old guard. Especially, when they see things in a different light than I do. (RB15)

These excerpts illustrate the way in which Cuban journalists from different generations have come to see the Soviet and highly bureaucratic structure of the Cuban media as the main problem of Cuban journalism.

6. Soviet impact on ideological freedom

The Soviet influence on political and media structures was reinforced in 1972, when Cuba joined the COMECON, the economic organisation of mutual assistance led by the Soviet Union in the Eastern Bloc. Tighter economic ties brought about a period of Sovietisation that had negative repercussions on intellectual freedom. The period between 1971 and 1976 is commonly known as the ‘Grey Quinquennium’ (‘El Quinquenio Gris’).

The term, coined by Cuban intellectual Ambrosio Fornet in 1987, reflects the greyness of a period of bureaucratisation that brought about the persecution of intellectuals accused of producing counter-revolutionary works (understood as anything deviant from the official norm and morals, such as homosexuality). The period was characterised by a growing influence of Soviet-style ‘socialist realism’ on Cuban artistic and cultural policies and promoted ethical values over aesthetic ones, pedagogy over introspection, and Panglossian views over critical thinking. For instance, artistic production was defined on moral and nationalist grounds in the 1971 ‘Congress of Education’, which included cultural policies: ‘Art is a weapon of the Revolution; a product of the combative moral of our people, an instrument against the penetration of the enemy. The socialist Revolution is the highest achievement of Cuban culture’ (PCC, 1971). The shift towards bureaucratism, dogmatism, and ‘social realism’ took place against the will of leading Cuban intellectuals and artists, as the following excerpt shows:

Us –young Cubans who saw ourselves as the inheritors and representatives of the literary and artistic avant-garde– could not share this view... [W]hich was a serious problem because the idea that ethical discrepancies hid political discrepancies had been gaining influence among the dogmatic circles. (Fornet, 2007: 5)

Cuban intellectual Ambrosio Fornet (2007) considers that the routinisation of support became widespread in cultural and artistic production during the ‘Quinquennium’. In this context, cultural production became a dispassionate goal to be met, damaging creative enthusiasm (ibid, 2007: 15). Therefore, there seems to be a consensus on the everlasting tolerance of bureaucratism, dogmatism, and mediocrity in cultural production (García Luis, 2013; Fornet, 2007; Coyula, 2007). As the dynamism and the critical spirit that some journalists experienced in the early revolutionary media slowly declined, it was replaced by a triumphalist, dogmatic and uncritical portrayal of society (Espina, 2008; Leyva and Somohano, 2008). This could be at the roots of the de-professionalisation and devaluation of Cuban cultural expressions (Quiroga, 2005).

The process of de-professionalisation was further intensified during the ‘Special Period’. An increased Party oversight and (RC9) harsh budget cuts produced a dispersal of

professional journalists, who were either placed in other sectors, or simply fled the country. Those who remained at the newspapers also endured extreme personal and material difficulties that hindered their ability to report on citizens' problems. A leading scholar recalls the challenges of getting the news in the 90s in the following excerpt: '[W]hat we lost, in a way, was the practical skills that enable you to write informative pieces, to make the news [hacer noticias], because even if there were a lot of interesting stories, there was no way of covering them' (RC4).

The idealisation of 'the Revolution' produced a '*Panglossian*' media construction of society, presenting an idealised image of the country that hides citizens' daily problems, a senior opinion writer considers (RD6). The main problem with this view is that it failed to hold leaders accountable for the dysfunctions of the system. In the face of an external enemy, public self-criticism was interpreted as potentially damaging for national unity, revealing internal weaknesses to 'the enemy'. Consequently, the journalists were forced to offer a rather simplistic, jingoistic account of society, creating 'very repetitive, very transmissive, and very triumphalist' articulations (RA20). Therefore, the both closer ties with the COMECOM in the 1970s and the sudden dissolution of the Soviet bloc two decades later had a great ideological impact on Cuban journalism that manifested itself through language, either reproducing Soviet bureaucratic 'greyness' or the need to lift people's morals during a 'special period' of harsh survival.

7. Soviet impact on professionalisation

If there is an element that permeates the preceding lines, that is the impact that Cuba's economic and ideological dependency on the Soviet Union had on the de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism. The doctoral research of Elizalde (2014) has found a clear correlation between external political control (reinforced during the 'grey quinquennium'), the material hardship of journalists after the 'special period', and de-professionalisation. Her research indicates that it is not the absence of journalists' professional skills that leads to a lack of trust from 'the Party' and to poor remuneration, but quite the opposite. This is coherent with the account of some of the more 'radical' interviewees who argue that the symptoms are often confused with the disease, and that

both the origin and the solution to journalists' problems are structural. Limited media coverage is linked to de-professionalisation and lack of economic and professional choices, which leads to a lack of agency.

Throughout the interviews, there is a recurrent idea that continues to emerge: Cuban journalists' need to comply with Party guidelines in order to protect their professional and economic status. Therefore, the interviewees seem wary of taking individual steps, as this could put their professional and economic stability at risk (RA17; RA21; RA14; RD10; RD18). The need to play it safe could be at the roots of journalists' *acomodamiento*, of their conformity and compliance with the rules of the bureaucratic game. The interviews indicate a vicious circle of external Party control and professional disengagement, conformity, and de-professionalisation. The more de-professionalised journalism becomes, the more prone practitioners are to accepting Party oversight (Elizalde, 2014).

There is an important generational gap in Cuban newsrooms where recently graduated reporters move on to other sectors after completing the mandatory social work programme. As a young editor puts it, 'newsrooms get a lot of young people with an excellent academic background, but who need a lot of practical training. By the time we've managed to train them, they leave' (RB25). The generational gap is so pronounced that some senior journalists are even asked to go back to work after retirement to fill the gap (RD6). At one extreme, there are senior journalists who seem comfortable with an undemanding role. At the other extreme, there are young journalists who are willing to question bureaucratic structures yet lack the professional experience and the confidence to achieve their goals. According to editors, young journalists lack 'the assertiveness' ('*la garra*') that allows senior journalists to obtain certain information, even when all other sources close the door on them (RC3). This is particularly relevant when a great deal of bureaucrats assume that they have the right to censor information at their will, and to bully the inquisitive journalists (RD10; RB12; RB22; RB25; RA17). A digital journalist contends that government officials are used to treating journalists as tools to advance their message, and that levels of despotism vary depending on the officials' individual personality (RA17).

Another problem is that part of the political elite still subscribes to the Soviet model of Party media control, according to a leading scholar who was an important editor-in-chief in the 90s (RD23).

They tell you that but, at the same time, they don't create the necessary mechanisms that would allow this change to take place. This is because their mentality hasn't changed. They keep seeing the media as an instrument of propaganda, of dissemination, rather than one that fosters, and generates social consensus. (RA1)

Despite being a minority view, it is predominant among older Party leaders, who tend to occupy key political positions. Therefore, the conceptualisation of the media as an instrument of Party bureaucracy lies at the heart of the contradiction between official claims of change and professional agency to lead or adapt to de-sovietise journalism.

8. Conclusion

One of the key arguments of this paper is Cuban intellectuals' early awareness of the propagandistic role of the media, and their efforts to resist it through a professionalisation of cultural and artistic practices. While the revolutionary narrative privileges unity over difference, the interviews indicate that 'the Revolution' has also characterised from the outset by internal tensions, processes of cultural negotiation and resistance, repression and rebellion, personal and collective sacrifice and confrontation (Guerra, 2012; Kapcia, 2014).

The findings indicate that the sovietisation and de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism have gone hand in hand. However, while the Party has stressed journalists' responsibility in the lack of professionalism, the interviews reveal that the Soviet influence on structures and intellectual freedom have come with a generalised lack of journalistic agency. This could explain why official calls to overcome bureaucratic practices have had a limited impact on journalistic practices, since the structure of the media system remains untouched.

The data indicates that Cuban journalists are asking for structural changes that reach both the media and the political system. However, the difficulty of channelling those views within the institutional media system pushes debates about intellectual freedom, media

structures and journalistic practices towards the independent digital media sphere. While not all independent projects are funded through foreign aid programmes, some of the most influential ones, such as *El Toque* and *Periodismo de Barrio* have disclosed that they have accepted funding from European governments. This creates an interesting situation by which foreign aid contributes to building the capacities of Cuban journalists dissatisfied with the official media and has helped consolidating non-bureaucratic spaces for debate. In this sense, the Cuban case sheds light on the usefulness of foreign funding for providing ways of structuring, organising and exercising journalism in a way that strengthens professionalism while challenging the Soviet, bureaucratic nature of the institutional media.

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