

# LLEGÓ EL PAQUETE

REXAMINING INTERNET PRACTICE, DEMOCRACY, AND PIRACY  
THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA DISTRIBUTION IN CUBA

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April 15, 2016

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in the  
Program in Science and Technology Studies at Brown University

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For me, this thesis embodies over a year of my life and all the experiences, learning, failures, triumphs, friendships and everything else that came with it. Many people were involved throughout this process and offered guidance, insight, and much needed support.

My first thanks are to Jennifer Lambe who, as my thesis adviser, guided me through this long journey from beginning to end. Every time I came to her office feeling lost and as though I had no idea what I was doing, I left with confidence in myself and a clear idea of what I needed to do next. Her advice on my travel to Cuba and feedback on my writing were immeasurably helpful during this process, but what I value the most about her support is the way she was able to instill in me the courage to take myself seriously as a writer, researcher, and producer of academic thought. I am forever grateful for her guidance.

I thank my second reader, Geri Augusto, for her intellectual inspiration and for providing much needed feedback from a Science and Society perspective. The theories and concepts I learned in her class greatly influenced my academic track throughout undergraduate, and I doubt I would have written this thesis without that influence.

I am extremely grateful to all the staff at Casa de Las Américas in Havana, and especially to Adiley Cruz Rosa and Gerardo Hernandez, for their support and helpfulness during my trips to Cuba. Thank you to Susel Torres for immensely improving my Spanish writing skills. Thank you to María for being always incredibly kind and caring and making me feel so welcome when visit.

Thanks to the Science and Society Department, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the Office of the Dean of the College for the funding that allowed me to complete this research.

I am indebted to the Quizá family, Ricardo, Mabel and Riki, for introducing me to El Paquete and allowing me into their home on numerous occasions to observe paquete transfers.

Thank you to Professor Evelyn Hu-Dehart for introducing me to this phenomenon and for being so incredibly supportive during our time in Cuba and after.

To my friends in Cuba, who only occasionally raised an eyebrow at my unending, strange questions and semi-willingly came on all the adventures on which I asked them to join me throughout my research.

To Christin Aucapiña for putting up with me and inspiring the title.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my family for their constant and unwavering support of me and all my endeavors. I would not be here without them.

## INTRODUCTION

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On a warm Tuesday afternoon in Havana, Cuba I sat in front of a monitor watching my professor's son copy files from an external hard drive onto his computer. He copied new blockbuster films, some TV shows he watches weekly, a digital magazine with good graphic design that, as a graphic design student, he likes to read, and some telenovelas for his grandmother, among several other items. Once finished with copying, he walked me through the entire hard drive and its contents, ranging from movies and TV shows to music to antivirus software updates. He showed me an offline classified ad platform similar to Craigslist, several comedic videos from Youtube, and several offline webpages from celebrity gossip sites. The amount of data totaled just over one terabyte, and its vastness was impressive and a little overwhelming. My friend explained that he receives a hard drive just like this for a few hours every Tuesday afternoon. Each time it comes, the one terabyte of information is updated, filled with new material and rotating older content. The new content is extremely current; he watched the latest episodes of Game of Thrones just a few days behind North American viewers.

I was amazed at the speed and frequency with which this digital information was accumulated and distributed. Collecting this large quantity of information on a weekly basis would be difficult in the United States, where even the notoriously terrible public Wi-Fi at Starbucks is better than most connections in Cuba. This was in the spring of 2015 and I had lived in Cuba for about a month and a half at the time. I knew that Internet connections were not easy to come by and even for those who were able to connect, connection speeds were slow at best and non-functional at worst. I asked my friend how this phenomenon was possible, and where the

information came from. Although he did not know for sure, he knew of several theories, the most plausible being that data was downloaded by a few individuals who had Internet connections and then aggregated into the cumulative terabyte, transferred onto an external hard drive, and distributed.

As an undergraduate student interested in the relationship between technology and society, this phenomenon immediately grabbed my attention. I understood the impressive feat it was to collect and distribute this quantity of information at such a frequency. I wanted to find the origin of this information, climb up the chain from those who brought hard drives to individual consumers to the people who collected the information in the first place. I decided to study this phenomenon for my undergraduate senior thesis and was able to return to Cuba on two different occasions to do so.

As I began to research and think more about the people and circumstances involved in this distribution of digital information, I became less concerned with my original goal of finding the creators. I saw that there were much wider implications for this phenomenon and they told a story about Cuba, Cuban citizens and the role of technology in society that was more important to me than a story about how the data gets to the country in the first place. Following this line of thinking, the final narrative I have constructed here speaks more about technological determinism<sup>1</sup> and the politics of technological access than it does about the actual distribution of this information in Cuba. Though I do provide analysis of the phenomenon itself, I believe these broader implications are more important for Cuban citizens involved in this system than specifics of how the system operates.

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<sup>1</sup> Technological determinism is a theory presuming that technology drives the development of social culture and values. It is believed to have been coined by U.S. sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen. For examples of theoretical work on technological determinism, see literature by Marshall McLuhan.

This analysis will bring together conversations about Cuba and conversations about the social and cultural functions of technologies. The arguments I make about technology can be more broadly applied than just Cuba, and therefore I want to provide some background information so readers without previous knowledge of Cuba may understand what I wish to say. The system of digital information transfer I describe up to this point is called *El Paquete* in Cuba. The name means “the package” in English and describes the manner in which this one terabyte of digital information is kept “packaged” together throughout the distribution network. As I discuss in the following sections, this package can change at the discretion of any individual with access to it and there may exist, simultaneously, several different versions of this “package.”

As I mentioned, the origin of *El Paquete* is uncertain, though recently several individuals have claimed to be its creator.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of how the actual information gets to the island and who is responsible for bringing it, once there it gets grouped into “packages” approximately one terabyte in size, loaded onto external hard drives, and sold to a first tier of distributors. These distributors then sell to several other distributors until it reaches a point where it is sold to end consumers, or individuals who do not plan to resell the package. Although they may distribute it to family and friends, these end consumers do not use the process to make a profit. At this point, it usually costs the consumer CUC\$2.00, or the equivalent of about USD\$2.20.<sup>3</sup>

*El Paquete* developed within the past ten years<sup>4</sup> out of a culture of sharing digital media via external storage devices such as external hard drives and flash drives. This type of digital sharing

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<sup>2</sup> Johnny Harris, “This Is Cuba’s Netflix, Hulu, and Spotify – All without the Internet - Vox,” *Vox*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/21/9352095/netflix-cuba-paquete-internet>.

<sup>3</sup> The CUC, or Convertible Cuban Peso, is one of two currencies in Cuba. It is matched to the United States dollar but exchange between the two is subject to a 10% tax, making the exchange rate USD\$1.1 to CUC\$1.

<sup>4</sup> Various sources cite different years as the beginning of *El Paquete*, ranging from six to fifteen. In my own opinion, it is likely that *El Paquete*’s developed from informal digital sharing to the

culture exists in Cuba and in other societies where Internet is not accessible<sup>5</sup> and therefore digital sharing methods like email are not a practical way to transfer digital information from person to person. El Paquete differs from this type of informal digital sharing network in that it is both institutionalized and designed to make a profit. The network of El Paquete follows a similar path every week, starting at its origin and dispersing through its various distributors, who each make a profit, until it reaches the end consumer.

This phenomenon also grows out of traditions of Cuban ingenuity in the face of scarcity. After the dissolution of the Soviet in 1989, Cuba's economy entered a severe depression lasting until the end of the 1990s. Many Cubans who lived through this time have stories of ways they had to improvise to make up for things they could not afford or were not available. Some of these are difficult to believe, such as hamburgers made from rubber tires, but many are simple and effective solutions to the scarcity of the time. Cuban artist Ernesto Oroza documents many of these inventions in his series titled *Technological Disobedience*. They range from electrical adapters to recharge batteries to antennas made out of lunch trays.<sup>6</sup> These types of inventions chronicle the response people have to scarcity, and *El Paquete* is another example responding to the scarcity of both digital and nondigital media in Cuba.

Some sources estimate the market of El Paquete to be as much as 600,000 homes across the island every week.<sup>7</sup> Although the network is most prevalent in the capital city of Havana, its

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institutionalized network it is now over considerable time, somewhere within this time range. Ernesto Oroza, "El Paquete Semanal: How Offline Piracy Flourishes in Cuba," *TorrentFreak*, December 26, 2015, <https://torrentfreak.com/el-paquete-semanal-how-offline-piracy-flourishes-in-cuba-151226/>.

<sup>5</sup> The "Measuring the Information Society Report 2014" created by the International Telecommunications Union listed Cuba as the least connected country in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> Motherboard, *Cuba's DIY Inventions from 30 Years of Isolation*, Youtube video, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-XS4aueDUg>.

<sup>7</sup> Javier Ortiz, "Un Servicio a Domicilio Personalizado (+Infografía)," *OnCuba*, July 7, 2014, <http://oncubamagazine.com/a-fondo/un-servicio-a-domicilio-personalizado-infografia/>.

dissemination extends to the other provinces as well. This large market accumulates an estimated CUC\$62.4 million every year.<sup>8</sup> The state is the largest employer in Cuba and private business is relatively new and limited to certain types, mostly relating to the tourist economy.<sup>9</sup> In this context then, *El Paquete* represents a huge amount of private dollars, unattached to the state. The average salary for Cubans in state jobs is just over CUC\$20 a month,<sup>10</sup> making this an extremely profitable enterprise for those involved.

The potential for profit is the motivating factor for distributors to partake in this system, but consumers are motivated by the broad range of media available in *El Paquete*. Cuba currently has only five television channels and attendance at movie theatres is decreasing.<sup>11</sup> Without readily available access to the Internet, Cubans are unable to fill the deficit of media available to them. *El Paquete* is able to fill that gap, providing Cubans with access to a broad range of media from all over the world. Given the estimated number of people who receive *El Paquete*, this network is an important part of media consumption for many Cubans.

*El Paquete* and its broader implications are closely linked to Cuba's relationship with the United States. Since the Cuban Missile Crisis, an economic and political embargo has existed between the US and Cuba. Recently, however, this relationship is beginning to change with United States President Barack Obama loosening many restrictions on trade with and travel to Cuba, and announcing the restoration of diplomatic relations in December 2014.<sup>12</sup> This change renewed US

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mario A. González-Corzo, "Recent US-Cuba Policy Changes: Potential Impact on Self-Employment," *Cuba Transition Project*, Focus on Cuba, no. 239 (March 11, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> "Anuario Estadístico de Cuba" (Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información, 2014), <http://www.one.cu/aec2014/17%20Tecnologias%20de%20la%20Informacion.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Benitez, "Less Cubans Going to Cinemas/Theaters," *Havana Times*, May 8, 2015, <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=111162>.

<sup>12</sup> Danielle Renwick, Brianna Lee, and James McBride, "U.S.-Cuba Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113>.



media interest in Cuba, and recently El Paquete has received some of this attention. When I was thinking about studying El Paquete, I started by reading some of the US media coverage. I found most of it to be fairly sensationalist, touting El Paquete as “Cuba’s Netflix”<sup>13</sup> or having the potential to free Cubans from the oppression of the Castro regime. Most of this coverage had undertones of democracy and the authors clearly saw El Paquete as a way to erode the Communist government in power.

For me, framing an argument about the potential of technology around political conditions and objectives is problematic. This kind of framework allows technology to be appropriated in order to serve the goals of a government and tends to conflate the actual capabilities of technologies with the desires of that government. My analysis of El Paquete is not a direct reaction to this biased media perspective, but it pushes back against notions that technology can and should be employed as a tool to carry out political objectives. I also work to undermine theories that view technology as a panacea for social problems and inequalities. My argument attempts to consider the role of this technology from the position of all the parties involved and examine the ways this technology is manipulated by the goals of both individuals and empires.

The first section stands as an exposition of El Paquete, where I provide an explanation of how El Paquete and its context in order to set the stage for my broader arguments. I analyze the contents and the distribution network of El Paquete, and contrast those with attempts the Cuban government has made to compete with it. I explain the perception of El Paquete by the state and the public and why these two entities have different perspectives. I conclude with an analysis of media consumption in Cuba in relation to El Paquete.

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<sup>13</sup> Harris, “This Is Cuba’s Netflix, Hulu, and Spotify – All without the Internet - Vox.”

The following three sections are encounters between El Paquete and existing paradigms that have been applied to it. By looking at El Paquete through these paradigms, I use it as a way to critique the paradigm itself. The first encounter, *El Paquete and The Internet in Cuba* is an outline of Internet access in Cuba at the time of this writing. I provide this in order to understand where *El Paquete* fits in terms of digital media consumption and creation within the country. The next encounter, *El Paquete and Democracy*, analyzes El Paquete in relation to theories about democratic technologies and determines whether its structure can qualify as democratic. The third and final encounter is *El Paquete and Piracy*, which looks at El Paquete as a network of mostly pirated material. I analyze how El Paquete fits into existing literature about piracy and the distribution of culture in the form of digital media. I relate this to existing and changing thought on intellectual property.

El Paquete holds an important place in the landscape of digital access and media consumption in Cuba, and I hope this thesis allows for a better understanding of this phenomenon and what it means in the local context. The stakes for understanding El Paquete increase as Cuban-United States relations change and therefore I am fortunate to be writing this at an important time in the history of these relations. I hope the arguments I lay out here also resonate with those less familiar with Cuba and speak to much broader and more global understandings of technologies and the ways in which we should begin to think about digitality and digital access in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

## AN EXPOSITION OF EL PAQUETE

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El Paquete represents an important source of entertainment in Cuba. It came out of a culture of digital sharing and developed into a sophisticated network of digital media distribution. This level of sophistication warrants an in depth analysis in order to understand both the way it functions and the position it holds in relation to Cuban citizens and the Cuban state. In order to develop this understanding, I will explain the structure of El Paquete's distribution network and analyze its contents. Then I will transition to a look at the official discourse by the Cuban state about El Paquete and the initiatives the government has undertaken in order to push back against El Paquete's expansion. I will transition to a focus of El Paquete from the perspective of Cuban citizens and explain the ways in which they conceptualize it. Finally, my analysis will conclude by analyzing some data on Cuban citizens' consumption of El Paquete, so we can better understand what is consumer, where and how. This analysis will provide background necessary in order to understand theoretical arguments regarding El Paquete.

First, I want to outline some terminology I will use to conduct this analysis. The name *El Paquete* will be used to refer to the as a whole, including data accumulation, distribution and consumption. To refer to one individual version of El Paquete, I will use the word *paquete*. The term *package* (the English translation of the word *paquete*) will also be used to refer to one individual version of a paquete. However, it should be understood that these packages are, in reality, not literal packages but rather groupings of digital files that remain together through a chain of distribution until it reaches the consumer. The packages may undergo changes along this chain as they come into

contact with different individuals who may change, add to, or take away from the files they contain. The individual files will be referenced using the words *media* or *information*. These words are incredibly broad in their everyday definitions, and that is relevant to their usage within this analysis given the wide range of categories the media in a package can fall under.

I collected the information for this analysis during my time studying abroad from January to May 2015 and during two separate research trips to Cuba, in August 2015 and January 2016. My research for this thesis was conducted during my time studying abroad in Cuba from January to May 2015 and in two separate research trips in August 2015 and January 2016. I did all research in Havana, Cuba, primarily in Vedado although some extends into Habana Vieja and Centro Habana. I used a combination of sight and participant observation, informal conversation, and informal and closed-ended interviews.<sup>14</sup> I observed individuals using Wi-Fi zones, spoke with informed experts, and interviewed friends and their families. I also spent time in the Biblioteca Nacional looking through archived copies of *Granma*, the official state newspaper in Cuba. Back in the United States, I conducted literature reviews and spent time documenting popular press coverage of El Paquete, consulting primarily online sources. I was able to collect five different paquetes throughout my time researching. All of the paquetes are from the same distributor, except one I collected in May that is from a different distributor than the rest. The distributors all live in Havana, in Vedado, a large residential area occupied primarily by the middle and upper class.

“El Paquete” is a package of digital information that consists primarily of audiovisual media, which is circulated throughout Cuba and provides Cubans with entertainment material for their consumption. El Paquete’s distribution network allows for this circulation to occur, as distributors sell the El Paquete’s contents to consumers and consumers spread the contents to their friends and

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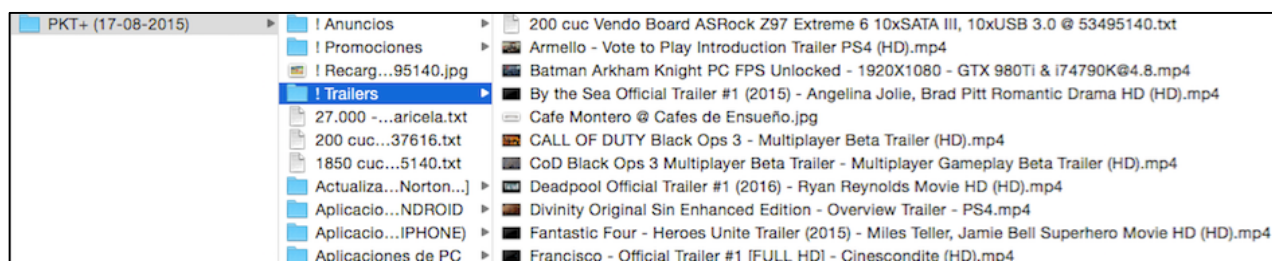
<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1 for a sample interview.

family. Via this network, Cubans receive access to a wide variety of media they otherwise would not. It begins by obtaining the files that make up the contents of El Paquete. The way this happens is not known for sure, and throughout my time in Cuba I have heard many theories ranging from trafficking data from other countries to the United States government supplying the media. A common one, that is also plausible, is that a few individuals, with access to personal and fast Internet connections on the island, download most of the content. They then compile the separate digital files into one “package” that circulates through the distribution network. This package is not a literal one, but rather a large number of digital files grouped together and organized on an external hard drive.

From this origin, the creators sell their curated product to other individuals who make up the second level of distributors. They can also be considered a second level of creators or curators. Every person that purchases El Paquete also purchases the ability to change their version of it by adding or removing files or changing the organizational layout. Each paquete is just a large grouping of digital files, so they are extremely easy to move around which make it easy for individuals to participate in the production process. In this way, the name El Paquete does not actually refer to one, singular entity but rather a conglomerate of different paquetes that circulate simultaneously through networks made up of different and possibly overlapping actors. The levels in this network continue to compound as each actor passes their version of the product on to another participant until an end node is reached, when the participant receives El Paquete but does not redistribute the product. The exact location of this end node is difficult to determine, as most consumers share portions of their paquete with friends and family, who in turn give material to others and continue to grow the network. El Paquete’s ability to distribute very quickly through many different hands becomes evident through this analysis of its distribution network. Without this network in place, El

Paquete would fail to deliver its content on a weekly basis, which is currently one of its most attractive features to its consumers.

The contents of El Paquete primarily of audiovisual media. There are some exceptions, including applications for iOS, Android and PC and antivirus software and updates. Beyond these exceptions, the categories of media are very broad. El Paquete includes the following categories: trailers, reality TV and contest shows, sports, documentaries, doramas (Korean dramas), humor, an “interesting” category, console games, PC games, mangas, cartoons, audio music, music videos, novelas, movies, series, and magazines. The media is organized within El Paquete following a structure of categorical hierarchies. The initial level of this organization is a list of categories that represent the types of media. For example, some of the headings in this first level of organization are *Music*, *Films*, and *Series*. Within each of these categories, the organization tends to differ depending on the nature of the media, the way it is released, and other factors. The actual files may be contained within this first level (see *Figure 1*) or further split up into more categories. There are a few examples that include an additional level of organization, such as a movie where there are



accompanying files like a poster image and possibly a subtitle file. All the files relating to one movie would be within the same file folder (See *Figure 2*). The organization of the El Paquetes is sophisticated, but necessary to make a marketable product.

*Figure 1*

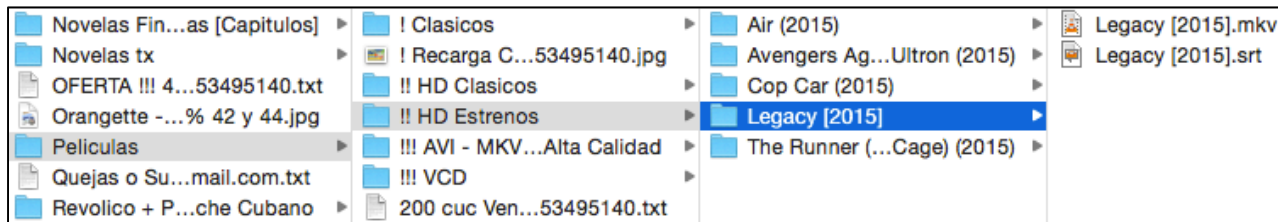


Figure 2

In the paquetes I collected, most of the media was produced in countries outside Cuba, with about 35% originating in the United States. However, there is also a large element of Cuban-produced media, especially in the music category. For example, in a paquete collected on 11 August 2015, over 60% of the audio and video music files were from Cuban artists.

El Paquete, is consistently updated on a weekly basis, and this regular renewal of information makes El Paquete appealing to consumers and incentivizes them to purchase paquetes regularly. From my research, I was able to obtain paquetes for multiple weeks from the same distributor, so I was able to comparisons between the different weeks and look for patterns that emerge in the differences between them. For media like films, television shows and music, the changes follow the release of new media. The paquete for one week will have Episode 1 of a particular series and the next week's paquete will have Episode 2. The time it takes for a newly released episode to show up in El Paquete is minimal, often as short as a week or a few days.<sup>15</sup> For media that is not on a regular schedule of new releases, such as old television shows and video games, the changes in paquetes from week to week seem to follow an alphabetical pattern. One week will have PC games starting with letter 'A' through letter 'C' and the next week will have games beginning with letter 'D' through letter 'F'. This pattern suggests that the producer(s) of this paquete have a database of media they are pulling from and rotating through it as weeks go by.

<sup>15</sup> A. C. Pertierra, "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, no. 5 (September 1, 2012): 399–414, doi:10.1177/1527476412443564.

## OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

While El Paquete encompasses an expansive distribution network across the island of Cuba and contains an astounding breadth and depth of content from all over the world, its position in the official discourse of the state and government in Cuba is less than favorable. Most of the official statements express a nature of contempt for the contents of El Paquete and what it means for the priorities and values of Cuban citizens. This discourse result from a history of the United States as a cultural enemy and a view of Cuban citizens as political agents in eyes of the post-revolutionary regime.

The ex-minister of culture in Cuba, Abel Prieto has spoken several times in interviews about El Paquete. As a government official, his words represent the opinion of the state. In an interview in 2014, Prieto states, in reference to El Paquete, that “new forms of cultural consumption” give an illusion that an individual is choosing what they want to consume. However, they are actually choosing from a curated selection compiled from media that aligns with a paradigm of hegemonic entertainment.<sup>16</sup> In Prieto’s perspective, the seemingly apparent democracy of El Paquete’s distribution network and the diversity of its content are illusory because they are rooted in United States hegemony. He claims that the acceptance of this media is the acceptance of culture that is concealing a political agenda. In 2015, Prieto referred to the United States specifically, where he states popular culture is produced based on market forces and products of quality are held at the same level as those of uncultured or uninformed content. Without an intervening body such as the Cuban Ministry of Culture, Prieto argues, this system of production confuses consumers who are unable to decipher good quality media from poor quality. Prieto’s statements show that the state of

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<sup>16</sup> Madeleine Sautié, “En Torno Al Nuevo Consumo Cultural,” *Granma*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.granma.cu/cultura/2014-11-03/en-torno-al-nuevo-consumo-cultural>.



Cuba believes that popular culture from the United States is hiding a political agenda which may be impressed on unsuspecting Cuban citizens who are unable to make intellectual decisions about the media they are consuming.

In August of 2015, I interviewed Victor Fowler, an important Cuban writer and cultural critic. He commented on the state's position of El Paquete and the way the position the United States as a cultural enemy of Cuba. When Cuba had to reinsert itself into the world after the fall of European socialism, the threats of cultural imperialism by global superpowers like the United States contributed to this viewpoint. Cuban elites have long positioned outside influences of capitalism and other hegemony as creating "social indiscipline" among Cuban citizens.<sup>17</sup> Fowler also notes that El Paquete does not contain messages that support the values of the post-revolutionary regime nor does it tout the sacrifices made by the Revolution. El Paquete, it seems, is entirely uninterested with the values and ideals of the Revolution and is instead entirely focused on entertainment. I will note here that this disinterestedness may play a role in the lack of attempts by the government to shut down or dismantle the system of El Paquete as there is nothing explicitly against the post-revolution regime in the contents. Finally, Fowler states that the state's opinion of El Paquete has changed slightly over time, with the initial reaction being extremely negative but showing less contempt in more recent times. This opinion as a whole, however, remains primarily negative.

#### GOVERNMENT ALTERNATIVES TO EL PAQUETE

From the perspective of the Cuban state, El Paquete has the potential to erode the values and ideologies of the Revolution among the Cuban populous. Whether or not this threat is legitimate, the government has taken some steps to combat El Paquete. While they have never

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Lambe, "The Strange Career of Social Indiscipline: Youth and Revolution in Today's Cuba," *Cuban Counterpoints*, August 21, 2015.

attempted to shut down the system, and I have heard few accounts of crackdown by the government, they have developed their own systems of digital media distribution that are evidently modeled after El Paquete. Following the old adage “if you get beat them, join them,” the Cuban government created both “Mi Mochila”<sup>18</sup> and “Pa’que Te Eduques.”<sup>19</sup> Mi Mochila came first as is now a few years old and attempted to directly compete with El Paquete. Pa’que Te Eduques” began in the summer of 2015 and, rather than competing with El Paquete, provides educational and entertainment content in a digital form to school teachers across the island.

While their basic purposes are similar, El Paquete and the government initiatives that attempt to confront it have little in common beyond this basic level of similarity. The social and historical contexts that led to the emergence of these different systems of media distribution influence their current existence and organization. The Cuban government holds a pejorative view of El Paquete that greatly influenced the way it developed both Mi Mochila and Pa’que Te Eduques. These viewpoints helped to construct these two entities and manifest themselves in differences of distribution and content between Mi Mochila, Pa’que Te Eduques and El Paquete.

For this discussion, I will rely on information I collected during my research in Cuba. I was able to obtain access to one mochila, which is from the Joven Club in Vedado, located on Calle L between Calle 23 and Calle 21. The way the mochila distribution system works, instead of being modified every week like El Paquete, it goes through periodic updates every few weeks. When I collected the Mochila, I was told it had just been updated the weekend before, so it represents a recently updated version of a Mochila. I was not able to interact directly with an example of “Pa’que Te Eduques” but I was able to conduct an interview with the project manager of the initiative,

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<sup>18</sup> The English translation of “Mi Mochila” is “My Backpack,” which attempts to mirror the naming of El Paquete.

<sup>19</sup> The English translation of “Pa’que Te Eduques” is “So you can educate yourself” which reflects the educational nature of the system.

Stalina Prado, who explained its purpose and structure to me. I will use this information in the following discussion.

There is a large difference in the processes of distribution between El Paquete Mi Mochila, and Pa'que Te Eduques. For Mi Mochila, there is no network of distribution, but rather a handful of distribution centers where those seeking to purchase Mi Mochila must go to obtain it. These centers are the Joven Clubs that exist in towns and barrios throughout Cuba. Joven Clubs were set up by the Cuban government to be places where Cubans could access technology. When I visited the central Joven Club of Vedado in Havana, I found myself surrounded by preteen boys waiting their turn to play Call of Duty, a multiplayer online first person shooting game. There were signs posted around the waiting area for classes that would be held on how to use different software programs such as Microsoft Word. Mi Mochila was loaded onto a desktop computer where I sat with my hard drive to copy the material I wanted. With Mi Mochila, the distribution chain does not extend much beyond the individual copying the material. While they might choose to pass some of the information on to other individuals, this action does not extend out nearly as far as it does with El Paquete.

In the interview with Stalina Prado, the project manager of Pa'que Te Eduques, she explained that the distribution network relies on messengers contracted by Cinesoft to bring each Pa'que Te Eduques to different drop off points around Cuba. It is then distributed to school that give it to teachers. The official distribution network stops here, although Prado acknowledges that teachers may choose to share content with students or their family and friends. In comparison with El Paquete, this network reaches far fewer individuals. However, as Prado stated in the interview, Pa'que Te Eduques does not attempt to compete with El Paquete.<sup>20</sup> It makes sense, then that the potential distribution reach is limited, as it is targeting only teachers.

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<sup>20</sup> Abbie Galloway, Interview with Stalina Prado, January 15, 2016.

Mi Mochila and Pa'que Te Eduques run on very different updating schedules than El Paquete. Although I was only able to collect one mochila, and therefore cannot make comparisons between different versions, I did learn that it is not updated nearly as often as El Paquete. When I first went to the Joven Club in Vedado to get Mi Mochila, I was told to come back after the weekend because they would be updating it as it had not received new media in about a month. It is even possible that my visit to the Joven Club prompted this, and otherwise it would have remained outdated. This is in comparison to El Paquete, which is updated on a weekly basis. Pa'que Te Eduques is on the same update schedule as Mi Mochila, and updated versions are sent out to distribution centers on a monthly basis. While this monthly schedule of update frequency may be all the Cuban government can handle, it does not allow Mi Mochila or Pa'que Te Eduques to compete with El Paquete and its weekly updates.

Both Mi Mochila and Pa'que Te Eduques are curated entirely by the Cuban state. This is different from El Paquete, which is curated by Cuban citizens. This variance in production processes translates into a large disparity in the contents of the different systems. Mi Mochila contains much less entertainment and more media that attempts to educate. The general categories of information in Mi Mochila are: performing arts, visual arts, audiovisuals (shows, "better quality" novelas, etc), cinema, sports, education, humor, children, technology, literature, music, and videogames. While Mi Mochila still does contain media for the sole purpose of entertainment, it also includes material that is educational or cultural. Pa'que Te Eduques follows a similar content pattern, but also includes classroom learning materials for teachers. Most of these take the form of a simple computer program designed to instruct students on a particular subject, such as chemistry.

The origins of the media in these different systems varies to a certain degree as well. Since it is a product of the Cuban government and a response to the high amount of foreign media in El Paquete, Mi Mochila contains a large amount of Cuban produced media. However, this does not

mean it excludes foreign media. In the mochila I collected, the movie category does not contain one Cuban work. The collection of films available is made up of works from Argentina, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Spain, and predominantly the United States. About 78% of the films available in this mochila were produced in the United States. I was not able to examine the exact contents of Pa'que Te Eduques, so I cannot provide statistics on the national origin of its contents. However, I can conjecture that it would have similar content to Mi Mochila, given that both systems are housed within the Cuban government.

## PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

While the state has all but issued an outright rejection of El Paquete, the discussion on the ground amongst Cubans is quite different. This, of course, makes sense as Cuban citizens are the producers and consumers of this system and its product. It is interesting to note that despite its illicitness, El Paquete receives little, if any, criticism or rejection from the Cuban public in the way that it has in the official discourse. This overall general acceptance is definitely a contributing factor to El Paquete as the expansive network that it is today.

The basis for the existence of El Paquete is a desire by the Cuban public for more expansive offerings of audiovisual media. There are currently only four television channels broadcasted in Cuba and access to movie theaters is dwindling as fewer and fewer remain open to the public. Internet access on the island is limited at best, with approximately 27% of the population that has some type of access to the Internet.<sup>21</sup> Those who are able to connect do so on connections that are slow and generally on an infrequent basis. The options for consuming audiovisual media and popular

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<sup>21</sup> "Measuring the Information Society Report" (International Telecommunication Union, 2014), [http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2014/MIS2014\\_without\\_Annex\\_4.pdf](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2014/MIS2014_without_Annex_4.pdf).

culture are extremely limited in Cuba, and it makes sense that citizens would look elsewhere. El Paquete is able to take advantage of this severe deficit in Cuban popular culture and become such a prominent source of Cuban's leisure entertainment.

The term leisure in Cuba has a specific connotation in the official discourse where it is often referred to in a pejorative manner. In the eyes of the state, Cuban citizens are regarded as political actors who are not meant to partake in frivolous leisure time activities or consuming banal popular culture media. Victor Fowler talks about something he calls "the right to be banal". This is the right of Cubans to consume what they want to consume and he considers it to be "un derecho de la autoridad" or "a right of authority." This suggests that El Paquete is a statement by Cuban citizens that they are not just serving as actors for the Cuban state and possess authority over themselves. Fowler considers socialism to be an important aspect of this phenomenon. From his perspective, the ideals of the socialist regime influence the state to value certain cultural production that does not align with the popular culture desired by the Cuban public.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of leisure is not just something thought about by the Cuban state and major players in the academic or institutional discourses. Conversations with Cubans outside these spheres show that authority over one's own leisure time is important. In an informal interview, a middle-aged school teacher expressed how when she is home from work and wants to relax in the evenings or on weekend afternoons, she wants to be able to watch the television shows that she likes. She says that El Paquete is supposedly full of things that do not have the values or ethics of Cuba, and while some of its content is "basura" (Spanish for "trash") she believes this should not interfere with what media she is allowed to consume.<sup>23</sup> While not all Cubans may have this consciousness that they are

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<sup>22</sup> Abbie Galloway, Interview with Victor Fowler, August 17, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Abbie Galloway, Interview with a primary school teacher, August 15, 2016.

making a claim to self-authority, the general opinion in terms of El Paquete and popular culture consumption amongst Cubans is similar to this.

This dissatisfaction with the offerings of Cuban media can be seen in the perspective of likes and dislikes, but can also have connections with identity and ability to relate and connect with the media. A young Afro-Cuban friend of mine expressed in an informal conversation that what he gets from El Paquete is mostly rap music and skateboarding videos. He is very involved in the skateboarding community in Havana and there is no Cuban-produced skate media available. Therefore, he must turn to alternative sources for this media, namely friends who live in North America and El Paquete. His interest in rap music allows him to connect with a genre of music that stems from black culture and affirms blackness. Marc Perry shows that US hip hop is quite popular among black Cuban youth, especially those from poor and marginalized communities and calls for the recognition of “not only the ways it is actively consumed transnationally.” He suggests that this type of consumption can serve as a productive method of black self-making.<sup>24</sup> While there is rap and hip hop music produced in Cuba, some of which discusses social issues and issues faced by Afro Cubans, my friend mostly prefers the rap produced in the United States. He cites Kendrick Lamar as one of his favorite artists, specifically the *To Pimp a Butterfly* album that explores themes relevant to the black community in the United States, including racism, colorism, economic inequality and depression. It is not surprising that a low income Afro Cuban youth could make connections with these messages as well.

Some of the motivation to consume the contents of El Paquete may stem from a desire to keep up with global popular culture trends and advances in technology. It is interesting to think of Cuba, a place with very little internet access and relatively expensive cellular phone service, could

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<sup>24</sup> Marc D. Perry, “Global Black Self-Fashionings: Hip Hop as Diasporic Space,” *Identities* 15, no. 6 (November 21, 2008): 635–64, doi:10.1080/10702890802470660.

create a demand for the number of phone applications that are available in El Paquete. Walking the streets of Havana, you frequently pass by cellphone repair shops indicating that enough people own cellphones to warrant this number of shops. From my personal experience, most young people own some type of cellphone and many have a smart phone. Even though conditions in Cuba may not be so that they warrant the possession of a smart phone, it is still a desirable product for many Cubans, especially young people. This same desire to keep up with trends is evident in popular culture as a whole as well, especially with young people. Many of those who I interacted with while I was researching were very aware of global popular culture trends, such as the *Minions* movie that was released in July 2015 and continued to be extremely popular in a global context during my research trip to Havana in August of that year. This did not change when I was in Cuba, and many of my young adult Cuban friends were just as informed about this phenomenon as my young adult friends in the United States.

Another reason the system of El Paquete has gained success and become so sustainable is the space it provides for Cubans to create and circulate products that do not have a place elsewhere on the Cuban market. Some of these products, like reggaeton music, magazines and advertising do not hold a favorable position in the eyes of the state. One Reggaeton artist, named El Yonki, became famous in Cuba primarily through distributing his music in El Paquete. He is now one of the most popular reggaeton artists in Cuba. His rise to fame may not have been possible without the network of distribution provided by El Paquete, as the Cuban government holds a hostile view of reggaeton music because of its tendency towards vulgarity and banality.<sup>25</sup> Magazines that are not state sponsored are illegal in Cuba, meaning it is very difficult to distribute a publication without

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<sup>25</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "Hearing the Change: Reggaeton and Emergent Values in Contemporary Cuba," *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 33, no. 2 (FALL/WINTER 2012): 227–60.



crackdown by the government. This was until El Paquete provided the opportunity for electronic magazines to flourish within its distribution system. One magazine in particular, *Vistar*, was often cited as a popular publication among people I spoke with. A graphic design student at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana commented that classmates he knows have been contracted to work with *Vistar* and other publication in El Paquete, showing these magazines and venues for Cuban designers to employ their skills within the country. El Paquete is also an important space for private advertisement, which is illegal in Cuba. El Paquete is really the only place where this time of commercialism can exist and has become important for the burgeoning private small business sector of the new economy. Applications and other kind of software also benefit from El Paquete as a distributor of products, as there is really no other place for Cubans to market these products to a wide audience within the country. While the state has begun advertising initiative for its own products, such as a video advertisement for Cristal beer,<sup>26</sup> El Paquete serves as a market for Cuban talent and creation to showcase itself.

## CONSUMPTION ANALYSIS

El Paquete has come to hold an important position in Cuba in terms of media consumption as it fills a large void in the offerings of popular culture media in Cuba. In this way, El Paquete is an extremely sustainable network and continues to contribute to this sustainability by incorporating the production of Cuban media and technology into its contents. The focus of this discussion will now shift to an analysis of consumption by Cubans to paint a picture of the day to day interactions with El Paquete. This will bring our discussion of El Paquete from a more macro analysis of discourse

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Capote, *Paulo FG Dale PLAY Con CRISTAL HD*, Youtube video, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f00D\\_axa44U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f00D_axa44U).

and production of popular culture to the micro aspects of this process that help to create and shape the process that comprise it.

First, I want to explain the sources I will be drawing from for this portion of analysis. The data comes primarily from two theses written by students of the School of Journalism at the University of Havana. These texts focus on consumption of *El Paquete* in different subgroups of the Cuban population. Both theses focus on young people, but one compares youth in the capital city with youth living in a rural province, while the other combines data from young Cubans residing in two different neighborhoods of the capital city. The second thesis cohort is comprised of fifty young people between the ages of 16 and 31 years of age equally divided between male and female identities. Most of these subjects are either employed or current students with some higher education, although some may be unemployed or have less schooling than this. The cohort for the first thesis of urban and rural comparison is not explicitly defined within the thesis, but the author does state that it is comprised of a group of young people also within the ages of 16 and 30 years of age. Since the rural versus urban thesis has a less defined cohort group, I will rely as much as possible on information from the other thesis that focuses on two urban locations in Havana. It is important to note that rural versus urban is just one factor that may affect results, in addition to many other markers of class, race, and gender. Some factors related to class were explored within the theses, so I will include these in my analysis though there will be many other factors and intersections I will leave unexplored due to lack of data.

We can begin this analysis by examining what of media is most popular with consumers of *El Paquete*. Based on the results from surveys collected for these theses, series television shows and movies are the most common type of media consumed.<sup>27</sup> Humor, adventure, police dramas, and

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<sup>27</sup> Isabel M. Echemendia Pérez, “Copi@ Y Comp@rte Una Vez a La Semana” (Universidad de La Habana, 2015), 92.

shows for kids are the most popular genres of television shows . Action, romance and comedy are the most popular genres for movies<sup>28</sup> These genres illustrate the purpose for which people consume El Paquete, which is primarily entertainment, as 56% of those surveyed responded.<sup>29</sup> The least common responses were education and information,<sup>30</sup> which may be another reason Mi Mochila is an unsuccessful endeavor as its attempts to educate do not meet the desires of Cubans to be entertained. Media from the United States is by far the most popular based on this data, which is followed by Colombian, Korean, Mexican, Spanish, Brazilian, and British media<sup>31</sup>. These numbers are indicative of the international nature of El Paquete content.

Most of those surveyed said they consumed content from El Paquete, whether it be family, friends, neighbors or other social relations, and 66% described their interactions with El Paquete as having a high level of sociability.<sup>32</sup> These numbers suggest that El Paquete has become entwined as part of social interactions in Cuba. One interviewee stated that people are often talking about things in El Paquete and it has become commonplace for conversations with friends or coworkers to center around these contents.<sup>33</sup> El Paquete is almost always consumed in the home, the surveys indicating around 85% of the time, which suggests that its contents are also becoming part of family life. These numbers make sense when the process of El Paquete is brought into the analysis. The distribution network is set up based on a system of sharing files between people, so it makes sense

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<sup>28</sup> José Raúl Concepción Llanes, “La Cultura Empaquetada: Análisis Del Consumer Audiovisual Informal Del Paquete Semanal En Un Grupo de Jóvenes Capitalinos” (Universidad de La Habana, 2015), 206-7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>31</sup> Echemendia Pérez, “Copi@ Y Comp@rte Una Vez a La Semana.”

<sup>32</sup> Concepción Llanes, “La Cultura Empaquetada: Análisis Del Consumer Audiovisual Informal Del Paquete Semanal En Un Grupo de Jóvenes Capitalinos.”, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 116.

that this concept of sharing would transfer from the distribution to the actual consumption of the product.

El Paquete is also consumed very frequently, with 46% of those surveyed consuming on a daily basis and 40% between four and six days a week.<sup>34</sup> This high level of consumption is indicative of the significant presence El Paquete has in the landscape of media consumption as a whole in Cuba. This position becomes even clearer when compared to opinions about Cuban national television. The most common response for motivations to consume El Paquete was a dissatisfaction with national TV offerings. When asked if consuming El Paquete diminished consumption of television, 60% said reduced or eliminated their consumption of television.<sup>35</sup> Television is seen as the most common form of audiovisual consumption in Cuba, and therefore El Paquete's position in the popular culture landscape is strengthened as it replaces this media source.

Despite the popularity of El Paquete's content and its pervasiveness in Cuba at this time, there are certain requirements necessary to access its contents, although these requirements vary depending on the exact interaction of the consumer with El Paquete. One of these is the financial resources to purchase El Paquete. If an individual has the CUC\$2 to spend on a weekly basis, they are able to access the full terabyte of information. However, many Cubans may not be able to spend this money and therefore do not have the same type of access. There are alternatives such as paying for portions or paying per item or copying from a friend that permit individuals without the financial resources to access El Paquete, but it is clear that financial resources alters the type of interaction one is able to have. Additionally, some form or forms of technology are necessary in order to copy and view El Paquete. Again, difference in access to these technologies will affect an individual's interaction with El Paquete. Someone with a personal desktop computer at home is able to pay for

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 131.

paquete delivery and copy contents onto their own hard drive. Someone with just a USB compatible DVD player is limited to purchasing El Paquete in a location where someone else can copy desired contents onto an external memory device. While only 4% of those surveyed in the University of Havana thesis listed financial as a barrier to accessing El Paquete, it is important to note that most of the subjects for this survey were employed or studying, indicating a higher level of economic status. The author also notes that all had access to a technology for copying and viewing the information, another indication of their economic status. Were this survey to be conducted with a more economically diverse cohort, the results would most likely show financial as a greater barrier to access.

The previous discussions in this exposition give a deeper understanding of El Paquete in relation to its distribution network and contents, the discourse of the Cuban government, the perspective of the Cuban public, and the way its contents are consumed. This analysis reveals much about the structure and organization of El Paquete, but also about the way leisure and consumption are positioned in Cuba. Cuban citizens are held by the state as political agents that must embody the values and ideologies of the Revolution. Cuban citizens, however, do not necessarily see themselves in this way, causing tension to occur between the government and its citizens. When this tension comes into contact with outside parties who also have a stake in Cuba, such as the United States, El Paquete becomes an important place to examine these relationships. In the following three sections, I will describe encounters between El Paquete and different paradigms that have been applied to it. Through these analyses, I hope we can create a more nuanced understanding of El Paquete and provide critiques of the paradigms themselves.

## ***ENCOUNTER 1*** **EL PAQUETE AND THE INTERNET IN CUBA**

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I bought a soda and found a seat on the ground beside a group of teenagers in school uniforms crowded around a laptop. They were on Facebook, looking at the new profile picture of a girl from school. In front of me was a young woman scrolling on her mobile phone. After a while she put headphones in and answered a video call from her family member. I opened up the Wi-Fi settings on my phone and connected to the “WIFI-ETECSA” network. After scratching off the back the Internet card I purchased with a coin, I enter the login information and get connected. I can see about 30 other people around me on phones, tablets and laptops. I hear “¡Maní! ¡Maní!”<sup>36</sup> (“Peanuts! Peanuts!”) as a woman approaches with a shopping cart full of peanuts, popcorn, and other snacks for sale. A few minutes later a man walks by me, glances my way and asks “¿Tarjeta?” (“Internet card?”). I shake my head no and he moves on to the next person. After a while the group of students next to me leaves, and the woman on the video call follows them shortly after. They are replaced by a younger man on his phone and a grandmother and her grandson on a tablet. The grandson helps her figure out how to open the video chat application so they can speak with their family in Miami. After an hour, the time on my card runs out. I was able to check my email but I didn’t have time to finish all the research I needed to do. Hopefully the rain will hold off the next day so I can return and finish up.

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<sup>36</sup> “¡Maní!” in English means “peanuts” and is a commonly heard phrase in public spaces in Cuba. Street vendors shout it out to advertise the snacks they are selling, often peanuts packed in long, skinny paper cones but sometimes popcorn or chips as well. These vendors can be found in areas where people congregate, such as the bus stop, Wi-Fi zones, or the Malecón, a sea wall that runs along the city of Havana.

The Cuban government estimates that about 27% of the population has access to the Internet.<sup>37</sup> Other sources dispute this number, as it includes Cubans who have access to only the Intranet, a closed network of state-approved webpages, and instead suggest that the numbers of Cubans who have access to the global Internet is closer to 5%.<sup>38</sup> The International Telecommunications Union listed Cuba at 125<sup>th</sup> out of 166 countries globally on the basis of ICT development, which is the lowest ranking country of the Americas.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to determine a precise number of how many people in Cuba are able to connect to the Internet. A Cuban professor once told me to multiply the number of people who say they have access to the Internet by at least ten because for every person with Internet access, their partner, siblings, children, cousins, parents, friends and neighbors will also have access. However, this access is much different than what is imagined as Internet access in the United States and other countries with more developed Internet infrastructure.

The places that one can connect in Cuba are very limited. Having an Internet connection at home is, for the most part, illegal. There are some individuals who receive authorization from the government for a connection in their home, generally for work purposes, but the price of the connection is prohibitively expensive. An at-home Internet connection in Cuba is a huge privilege. Cuban hotels have had Internet connections for some time, but only recently have these become places where Cubans can connect. Until 2008, Cubans were banned from entering hotels and therefore did not have access to the Internet connections inside.<sup>40</sup> While that ban is no longer in

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<sup>37</sup> “Anuario Estadístico de Cuba.”

<sup>38</sup> “Cuba: The Island of the Disconnect | Global Risk Insights,” accessed February 27, 2016, <http://globalriskinsights.com/2016/02/cuba-the-island-of-the-disconnect/>.

<sup>39</sup> “Measuring the Information Society Report.”

<sup>40</sup> “Ban Lifted on Cubans Staying in Tourist Hotels - World News - Americas - Focus on Cuba | NBC News,” accessed March 19, 2016, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/23878991/ns/world\\_news-americas/t/ban-lifted-cubans-staying-tourist-hotels/#.Vu2E-RIrKH0](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/23878991/ns/world_news-americas/t/ban-lifted-cubans-staying-tourist-hotels/#.Vu2E-RIrKH0).

effect and Cubans are able to use Internet connections in hotels, the price to connect is very costly. For an hour of connection, it can cost as much as CUC\$7, not an affordable option for most Cubans. There are also ways to connect beyond the legal options. Snet, or Street Network, is a series of approximately 9,000 computers connected together via hidden antennas. These types of connections are illegal, but the state has not been especially strict in enforcing this since the network prohibits porn and political content.<sup>41</sup> While these options may be available to some with the financial resources and technological knowledge, most Cubans cannot access these connections.

In recent years, many Cubans accessed the Internet from a shared computer at work or school.<sup>42</sup> While some still connect this way, the number of people using public Wi-Fi zones to connect is increasing. Beginning in July 2015, the government opened 35 new public Wi-Fi areas across the island, five in Havana and the rest in other provinces.<sup>43</sup> The government also decreased the cost of connecting to public networks from CUC\$5 per hour to CUC\$2. With these changes, the number of people using these connections is visibly increasing. Walking Calle 23 of Vedado in the afternoon will prove this, with groups of Cubans sitting on benches, staircases, ledges, and the ground using their cellphones, tablets, and laptops to connect to the public Wi-Fi. This area, called La Rampa, is one of the most popular Wi-Fi zones in Havana. To access the connection, an Internet card is required. These cards cost, officially, CUC\$2<sup>44</sup> for an hour. However, they are often out of stock at the ETECSA locations where they are sold because individuals will buy many cards for CUC\$2 when they are available and resell them on the street for CUC\$3 or more.

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<sup>41</sup> “Cuba’s Illegal Underground Internet Is Thriving,” accessed March 19, 2016, <http://gizmodo.com/cubas-illegal-underground-internet-is-thriving-1681797114>.

<sup>42</sup> Ellery Roberts Biddle, “Rationing the Digital: The Politics and Policy of Internet Use in Cuba Today,” Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2013-15, July 10, 2013, 5.

<sup>43</sup> “Abrirán Salas de Wi-Fi En 35 Puntos Del Territorio Cubano, Anuncia ETECSA,” *Cubadebate*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2015/06/18/abriran-salas-de-wi-fi-en-35-puntos-del-territorio-cubano-anuncia-etecsa/>.

<sup>44</sup> CUC\$2 is the equivalent of USD\$2.20.



While the current environment of public Wi-Fi zones in Cuba is better than before the government implemented the recent changes, the conditions of connecting still limit Cubans' access to the Internet. During one of my research trips, I was unable to connect to the Internet for several days in a row because it was raining nonstop. There is little covering in the area where the connection reaches, so I had to wait it out. Having to sit outside, with no official space designated for connecting can make the experience difficult. Connection is weather dependent, and can become almost impossible during the rainy season or the hot summer months. If the weather is decent the CUC\$2 price of the connection can still stand as a barrier for some. While much better than the original of CUC\$5 per hour, it is still not affordable for many Cubans. Those working in state jobs and not the private sector receive less than this amount for one day's work.<sup>45</sup>

Another barrier to access is lack of digital education and digital literacy. Many Cubans have never spent much time on the Internet, so figuring out what to do once connected is often difficult. Obtaining the education and experience becomes even more difficult given the two previous dilemmas of connection zone conditions and price of connection. I once sat with two middle-aged men at the Wi-Fi zone outside of Hotel Presidente in Vedado. They wanted to connect to Facebook, but were having trouble getting the email and password they had written down as the log in information to work. After working with them awhile, we figured out that the email and password were not the log in information log in information for Facebook, but rather for their email account. They had never actually gone through the process of creating a Facebook account, because they didn't know they had to. They had never logged into Facebook before, so these two individuals had no conception of the set up and process required for a Facebook account to exist. While I worked with them, we did not have time to create the account before the time ran out on the Internet card

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<sup>45</sup> "Anuario Estadístico de Cuba."

they were using. While they surely gained knowledge about using their email and Facebook, they also used CUC\$2 and an hour of their time to learn this. I will not venture to estimate the time that would be required to actually create the Facebook account, develop a profile and connect with friends, but I'm sure it would be substantial, especially if no one with a better understanding of Facebook, email and other Internet processes was there to guide them through troubleshooting. This example illustrates the kinds of dilemmas Cubans face when attempting to connect and use the Internet. Given the aforementioned difficulties, coupled with a lack of knowledge and understanding of digital practices, the large gap that exists between the Cuban populace and digital literacy becomes evident.

Despite lack of digital education and high barriers to access, there are still many people connecting and a culture developing around these Wi-Fi zones, like the scene I describe at the beginning of this section. In the afternoon or early evening on a day with good weather is the best time to experience this culture. Often groups of school-aged children come together to the zones and use their phones or share a friend's laptop, taking turns to connect. They spend time on social media, primarily Facebook, but also playing games, watching YouTube videos, listening to music and exploring their interests on the web. They buy sodas and sit together, alternating between using the Internet and chatting with each other. Every so often someone will pass by selling Internet cards they purchased in bulk at ETECSA, the state-controlled provider of telecommunications technology in Cuba, and are now reselling on the street. Other vendors walk by selling popcorn and peanuts.

Individuals come to the zones to check social media and often to video chat. Video chatting is very common at Wi-Fi zones, and people don't seem to mind conversing with loved ones in an open and public environment. Part of the popularity of video chatting may come from the fact that it is a lot cheaper than a phone call, especially to the United States. Phone calls between the US and Cuba can cost between \$0.50 and \$2 per minute. Compared to video chatting, at CUC\$2 per hour of

connecting, calling is extremely cost prohibitive and makes video chatting a financially better option for many people. Beginning in the fall of 2015, ETECSA accounts can be recharged internationally using an online service. This option was available for mobile phones since 2010 but now that it is available for Internet accounts, the appeal of using online platforms of communication is that much more for Cubans with family abroad.<sup>46</sup>

While many Cubans are limited to the ETECSA Wi-Fi zone and use that connection almost exclusively for communication, this is not the only experience of Cubans and the Internet. As I sat outside a hotel in Old Havana, trying to connect to the Internet there, a high school student approached me to ask if the connection was good. I told him it wasn't, but we began talking and I learned that he connects to the Internet almost everyday. He spends a lot of his time on Wikipedia, learning about whatever topic interests him that day or perusing the statistics from his favorite soccer teams. He also uses Rosetta Stone regularly to learn English and Portuguese. Much of the time he connects for free, but illegally, using an application that gives him access to hotel Wi-Fi networks via the accounts of tourists. Although I was unable to obtain specifics about this application, the fact that it exists did not surprise me. Connecting to protected networks is not uncommon. As I walked through the streets of Havana, watching for where people were on their phones and seemed to be connected, most of these networks were not ETECSA and had password protection. Other young people I know in Havana connect at the residence of their friend, who has an illegal network in his home and makes money by charging people to use it. In a place where connections are limited, people find creative solutions to get around the scarcity. This example is

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<sup>46</sup> Joseph Ramirez, "New Service Allows Nauta Accounts in Cuba to Be Recharged Internationally," *Globalnewswire.com*, accessed February 28, 2016, <https://globenewswire.com/news-release/2015/10/07/774333/0/en/New-Service-Allows-Nauta-Accounts-in-Cuba-to-be-Recharged-Internationally.html>.

part of a history of Cuban ingenuity in the face of scarcity, stemming from the Special Period in the 1990s.

The Wi-Fi zones are quickly becoming a Cuba-specific culture and prominent social space, especially in the lives of young Cubans. The verb *conectar* is part of this culture and its use is an indicator of how these young Cubans conceptualize access and use of the Internet within their habits and routines. *Conectar* means “to connect” in English, but in Cuban Spanish it has come to mean “connect to the Internet” in many contexts. Saying “*voy a conectar*” means “I am going to connect” and indicates that the person making the statement is going to the Wi-Fi zone, or another space with Internet access, to connect. If someone says, “*No estoy conectando en estos días*” means they have not been on the Internet recently. The use of this verb connotes the idea of the temporary connection that encompasses the Cuban experience of accessing the Internet. The travel to the location, the time spent in the space, and the face-to-face social encounters that occur there are unique to a place where Internet does not exist in the home and where connection is temporary and restricted to certain locations. Combined with the procedures of acquiring the Internet cards and the devices used to connect, this experience becomes uniquely Cuban.

The Wi-Fi zones are an important part of connecting to the Internet, but the practices and culture of the digital extend even beyond these spaces. Digital Cuban spaces existed before the Wi-Fi zones, and they continue to develop as access to the Internet increases. The Cuban government had an Internet presence and identity as early as the mid-1990s, with entities like InfoMed, a medical database, and Cubaweb, the tourist network.<sup>47</sup> The number of these official websites has grown and continues to do so. Through simple web interfaces, the Cuban government indicates to the world its

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<sup>47</sup> Cristina Venegas, *Digital Dilemmas: The State, the Individual, and Digital Media in Cuba*, New Directions in International Studies (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

investment in positioning itself in capital and digital capitalism.<sup>48</sup> The government also hosts news and blog sites to provide state-sponsored information to the world outside the island. Beyond government-sanctioned spaces, a large amount of attention on Cuban Internet spaces goes to dissident bloggers. Most famous is decidedly Yoani Sánchez, who started her blog, *Generación Y*, in 2007. She posts about the difficulties of daily life in Cuba and how these difficulties are connected to inefficiency and corruption in the government. The blog's audience is primarily outside the country, and has been successful in terms of getting attention. Sánchez won several awards and was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in 2008. The site is blocked in Cuba and Sánchez relies on others outside of Cuba to post her writing. The dissident community also includes anti-Castro Cubans in Miami who also publish material criticizing the government.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Cuban digital presence began as government-controlled or sponsored versus anti-government dissidents, this has not been the case for some time. The Cuban-based content on the Internet is diverse and spans a variety of interests and purposes. As Internet access continues to increase and Cubans become more comfortable existing in digital spaces, the digital content they produce will surely continue to develop in step. The inception and growth of *El Paquete* and its distribution network has created an additional space for digital identity to exist in Cuba. Some individuals have been able to work between these two networks to create entities that function both on and offline, within Cuba and outside.

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<sup>48</sup> Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Boadle Anthony, "Despite Bans, Cuban Dissidents Get Word to the Web Exiles Post Messages From Island's Anti-Castro Activists, Though Havana Blocks Sites," February 25, 2007, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/pb/archive/politics/2007/02/25/despite-bans-cuban-dissidents-get-word-to-the-web-span-classbankheadexiles-post-messages-from-islands-anti-castro-activists-though-havana-blocks-sites-span/6b864cc6-1177-4a70-b0c2-4f95d5e07092/?resType=accessibility&nid=menu\\_nav\\_accessibilityforscreenreader](https://www.washingtonpost.com/pb/archive/politics/2007/02/25/despite-bans-cuban-dissidents-get-word-to-the-web-span-classbankheadexiles-post-messages-from-islands-anti-castro-activists-though-havana-blocks-sites-span/6b864cc6-1177-4a70-b0c2-4f95d5e07092/?resType=accessibility&nid=menu_nav_accessibilityforscreenreader).

Revólíco is the name of a Cuban-based classified ads platform that is part of the contents of El Paquete. It began in 2007 as a website where Cubans, living both on and off the island, could post advertisements about items and services for sale. By 2008, the founder of Revólíco began working with distributors of El Paquete, which increased the potential audience and avoided the constant battle against government shutdown of the site.<sup>50</sup> Now, consumers of El Paquete receive an offline version of the platform that is updated weekly, following the distribution cycle of El Paquete. Revólíco stands as the only systemized way for Cubans to buy and sell goods and services on the island, and as such has achieved a success of 25,000 new listings per day and eight million views per month according to an interview with the cofounder.<sup>51</sup>

Another Cuban digital space with a developing impact is Vistar Magazine, a digital magazine focusing on Cuban popular culture. Robin Pedraja founded the magazine after he graduated from university with a degree in graphic design. He saw that the image people had of Cuba had outside the country did not reflect the Cuba that he and his friends knew. “Cuba is not all mulatas and cocos” Pedraja says, reflecting on the beginnings of the magazine.<sup>52</sup> He wanted to showcase the life and culture of young Cubans like himself. Vistar’s original circulation began in *El Paquete*, and this continues to be the primary source of distribution, along with a website, distribution points at cellphone repair shops throughout the city, and an app for iOS. Pedraja and his team are concerned with image. I asked why they only offer an app for iPhone, despite the fact that most Cubans have Android, if they have a smartphone at all. He responded with “We are trying to maintain an image.” This image is a very particular one, however, characterized by the young crowd of bar-going

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<sup>50</sup> “Cuban Web Entrepreneur Endures a Murky Status,” accessed February 27, 2016, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/542106/cuban-web-entrepreneur-endures-a-murky-status/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “Mulata” is a term for a woman of mixed, black and white, racial heritage often sexualized by white men. “Coco” is the Spanish word for coconut. Both of these terms describe imagery prevalent in state sponsored advertisement of the Cuban tourism industry.

reggaetón listeners. Many artists interviewed in the magazine are reggaetón artists and much of the content revolves around the culture associated with this genre of music. In the January 2016 issue of *Vistar*, an article listed the five best bars of Havana. They were some of the most expensive bars, outside of tourist locations, in the city. These examples show the type of image that Pedraja wants to showcase, and it is one of aspiring wealth and consumerism. While this may be the reality for some young Cubans, for many this represents a class status to which they do not have access. One of the future goals of the magazine is printing hard copies within Cuba. This an extension of the classed image the magazine developed around, as printing in Cuba represents the availability of extra resources. Pedraja says his other goal for the magazine is increasing international presence, as he wants the world to know his version of Cuba<sup>53</sup>

El Paquete has become an important addition to the digital spaces available in Cuba. Although it is not connected to the Internet, it gives Cubans the opportunity to create digital content that functions similarly to the way it would online, and distribute that content across the entire island. Additionally, Internet culture is beginning to take off in Cuba and is sure to see considerable expansion in the coming years. These two realms, the online and the offline, influence each other and the ways in which people interact with them. However, they are not dependent on one another, and surely some things happen in El Paquete regardless of the Internet and there are parts of Internet culture not shaped by the existence of El Paquete. This relationship has implications for the future of both digital spaces, but only time can elucidate how these futures will play out.

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<sup>53</sup> Pedraja, Robin. Interview with Abbie Galloway. Personal Interview. Havana, January 18, 2016.

## ***ENCOUNTER 2*** **EL PAQUETE AND DEMOCRACY**

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'Democratic technology' is a term used to describe technologies with properties that allow for the inherent distribution of power and control based on their design and implementation. Through a democratic rationalization, or understanding of the democratic potential that lies in the basic elements of technology, individuals without a particularly high level of authority or access are able to influence the development of a technology. Consumer agency is permitted to a large degree by these technologies.<sup>54</sup> Democratic technologies incorporate the consumers into the development process, allowing them to exercise influence on the final product. This places the market within society, therefore reinforcing a relationship between consumerism and citizenship.<sup>55</sup> The importance of democratic technologies is that they spread both knowledge and influence over the networks of actors that facilitate their development process, resulting in a distribution of power. This stands in contrast to a place like Cuba, where much of the technology and access to the Internet is regulated by the government, and the power associated with these technologies is centralized and concentrated. For this reason, El Paquete is seen as unique in the Cuban technological landscape. Its properties that liken it to a democratic technology contrast starkly with the centralized control of technology usually seen in Cuba, making it easy to sensationalize as a courier of democracy. This sensationalism can be seen in press coverage of the phenomenon in the United States. El Paquete

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<sup>54</sup> Maria Bakardjieva and Andrew Feenberg, "Community Technology and Democratic Rationalization," *The Information Society* 18, no. 3 (May 2002): 181–92, doi:10.1080/01972240290074940.

<sup>55</sup> Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).



has the potential to be considered a democratic technology, but determining this requires an analysis of the basic social and economic structures of El Paquete. These basic elements are influenced by the contextual circumstance in which the technology is embedded. While they could result in a technology that distributes power evenly, which could then be considered democratic, these elements also allow for power to accumulate in a hierarchical pattern.

The idea of a democratic technology is appealing to many because it allows all users to have equal access. In the same way that democratic governments are intended to put the power to make decisions about government in the hands of the populous, democratic technologies put the power to develop the technology in the hands of the consumers. This equality translates to the removal of social and economic hierarchies that exist in the world outside of virtual space. Within virtual space, without the restriction of different hierarchical power structures, individuals have the freedom to participate in their communities in way they may not have otherwise. Their voices are more likely to be heard because they have equal access to platforms of representation as everyone else. Minorities and oppressed peoples have the opportunity to say what they want the rest of the world to hear. The use of the online platforms, such as Twitter, in activism movements and revolutions are often touted as examples for the possibilities of democratic technologies.

#### OPEN SOURCE AS A COMPARISON

In order to better understand discourse around the relationship between democracy and technology, we can examine open source software, which is often used as an example for conceptualizing technologies as democratic. The source code of open source, the essential code that makes up the programs, is publicly available to edit and manipulate. This allows for anyone with an interest or investment of some sort to become a participate in the development of open source software programs. Proprietary software, such as Microsoft products, works in essentially the

opposite way. For these companies, the source code is arguably the most valuable part of the program, and is what they attempt to keep hidden. If somehow the source code were to be released in its entirety to the public, anyone could recreate the software and it would function the same. There would no longer be any incentive to purchase it from the company. Open source is often described as a democratic technology because it is organized in a network where many different citizen actors work on development concurrently. This model encourages collaboration and creative development, creates evolution through actions of many different actors, and distributes knowledge, and therefore power, among many participants.<sup>56</sup> Many consider open source software to be democratic because its consumers have direct influence on the design and development, meaning the final product will reflect the values and priorities of the consumer base. Open source software is sometimes associated with strategies of digital inclusion, organizational efforts or institutional policies aimed at removing barriers to technological access for groups and communities that do not currently have that access. An example of this is can be seen in Brazil, where the government stopped purchasing proprietary software and began to use open source instead, even allowing free downloads of software from government websites.<sup>57</sup>

With open source software exemplifying how technologies can embody principles of democratic technologies, comparisons and similarities can be made with El Paquete. Both open source software and El Paquete have similar organizational structures. A few individuals are responsible for aggregating the initial data for El Paquete, who sell this package of data to distributors, who in turn sell it to other distributors or to consumers. Every person who enters the

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<sup>56</sup> Steven Weber, “The Political Economy of Open Source Software and Why It Matters,” in *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 178–212.

<sup>57</sup> Sara Schoonmaker, “SOFTWARE POLITICS IN BRAZIL: Toward a Political Economy of Digital Inclusion†,” *Information, Communication & Society* 12, no. 4 (June 2009): 548–65, doi:10.1080/13691180902856753.

distribution chain of El Paquete has the ability and authority to edit its contents, effectively changing its composition for other consumers. In this way, both El Paquete and open source software rely on a network organization of consumers who also influence the development of the product. Every individual who becomes part of the distribution network of El Paquete also contributes to its development. As buyers pick and choose the items they want in their version of El Paquete, they create another version of the product that reflects their own values and perspectives. This product is then distributed to other consumers who do the same, picking and choosing based on their own personal preferences. This correlates to a similar process in open source where users “fork” source code, or create a copy of the original code, and add their own features and designs.<sup>58</sup> These processes show not only the involvement demonstrated by the consumer, but also the properties of network organization that exist in El Paquete and open source software. Change can occur at every node in the network, creating a product that evolves through different actors, occasionally leading to divergent changes that occur simultaneously and may develop into multiple versions of the product.

#### EL PAQUETE AS LESS THAN DEMOCRATIC

By focusing on just the process of development and organizational structure, El Paquete follows guidelines of democratic technologies and mirrors how these guidelines manifest in the example of open source software. El Paquete begins to diverge from this framework in terms of hierarchical power and wealth accumulation. While each actor in the distribution network of *El Paquete* is able to influence the development of the product, and therefore holds a certain amount of power, there is a significant hierarchical structure of power embedded into the network. Those at the top of this structure, the few individual responsible for aggregating the data for the contents, are

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<sup>58</sup> Weber, “The Political Economy of Open Source Software and Why It Matters.”

able to influence the material that makes up *El Paquete* in the first place. All other actors, the distributors and consumers, are able to reorganize or remove this content, but they have limited ability to add anything to the reservoir. This has implications for the articulation of the relationship between consumerism and citizenship. Decisions about what content should be included are restricted to a select few. Those at lower levels in the hierarchy can choose from a curated pool of content, but they are not directly involved in the decision making process of choosing this original content. While their interests and values may be considered in the decision, this is not a guarantee. The individuals choosing the content will choose what serves their own interests, which may or may not be the same as lower level creators/consumers. Given this analysis, the structure of *El Paquete* begins to mirror the centralization of state-approved media sources within the Cuban government, the very institutional structure it is perceived to oppose.

An argument could be made that all actors in this network have the potential to bring in their own material, therefore adding to the original content instead of just curating from this existing reservoir. This would support the idea of *El Paquete* as a democratic technology. However, this argument is difficult to support given that most Cubans, the individuals that make up the network organization of *El Paquete*, do not have access to the knowledge and capital required to obtain this new content. In order to enter the network organization of *El Paquete*, an individual must have a certain amount of financial capital and access to technological resources. Not all Cubans can afford the CUC\$2 required to purchase *El Paquete* on a weekly basis, meaning they are excluded from participating the network. The hardware required to participate in the network is not affordable or available to all Cubans. Technological knowledge is required to participate in the *El Paquete* network, but given the previous discussion about connecting to the Internet in Cuba and the cost of obtaining digital literacy, this knowledge is not equally available to everyone.

Even if an individual has the resources to buy into the network, the hierarchical structure embedded into the organization of the El Paquete network creates different levels of investment and return. The more resources an individual is willing and able to commit to the network, the higher up in the hierarchy they can be, and the more return they will receive from their investment. The profit generated from El Paquete sales is accumulated at the top, with a few people making a significant profit but most participants making little or no profit at all. This sort of wealth accumulation is typical of entities with capitalistic properties. It is important to note that these capitalistic properties of El Paquete are situated in the context of a socialist nation. Wealth accumulation is opposite to the values of the state, which are to spread wealth and equality. In this way, El Paquete embodies an economic structure less equal than other economic structures within Cuba.

#### WITH TECHNOLOGY, CONTEXT MATTERS

El Paquete is a technology possessing many democratic properties in terms of its collaborative development process, with evolution through many different actors and the ability to diverge into multiple versions developed at the same time. This gives many actors a say in how development proceeds and what the different iterations of the product look like. In this way, consumers become citizens with agency to influence the product they are consuming instead of choosing between different products developed entirely by others with separate interests. Questions about barriers to access and wealth accumulation reveal a hierarchical structure within El Paquete that diverges from the model of technological democracy. We can describe El Paquete in terms of its democratic properties, but we must also keep in mind that it contains elements of power and wealth accumulation that prevent it from being entirely democratic. These elements of power and wealth contrast themselves to the ideals of wealth distribution and equality of a socialist state. As

Bruno Latour would suggest, technology is influenced by social values and organization in the same way as any other science.<sup>59</sup>

Google is often incorrectly conceptualized as a neutral technology that can be understood through a democratic rationalization. The average Google user does not think critically about their interactions with Google, but rather goes to the website, types in their search query, and begins to sift through the pages of results. It is unlikely they will go past the first few pages of results, as they imagine these results organized based on relevance to the words they typed into the search box. The pages of results represent a hierarchy of the information that related to the search query. Google determines the way this hierarchy is organized by placing more value on some sources than others. Their motivations to value one source over another could be influenced by economic or other motivations that do not necessarily align with the values of the user. Those who hold the knowledge and power to implement technologies control the way users interact with them. The individual typing in the search query is unlikely to think about the power structures that govern the Google technology. This illustrates how some users, without an understanding of the way technologies work, can misconstrue certain technologies as democratic when they are not.<sup>60</sup>

Although technologies may have elements that allow them to be thought of as democratic, it is not just their inherent properties that determine this. It depends also on the ways human agents imagine and use these technologies. This opposes the idea of technological determinism, the belief that technology is not affected by social influences and instead dictates the way that social structures and values develop. This perspective leads many to see technology as the answer to social problems. Although technologies can be used as a tool to create social change, they can also serve to

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<sup>59</sup> *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Revised ed. edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>60</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything: (and Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

maintain existing or create new inequalities and systems of oppression. All technologies are thought up, designed, manufactured and sold in a world that operates based on certain power dynamics. These dynamics do not disappear within the digital world, but rather they manifest themselves in different ways. A technology such as El Paquete has the potential to exist as a democratic technology, but when implemented in a society it is permeated by a hierarchical structure that aligns with the interests of individuals who designed its implementation and contribute to its structure. These interests are not necessarily shared by all parties affected by the technology, including consumers. Therefore, El Paquete cannot epitomize democratic technologies, because of these factors, and because the hard drives, computers, and media that contribute to the structure of El Paquete are embedded in global and local power structures.

El Paquete is sensationalized by media outlets in the United States as Cuba's Netflix.<sup>61</sup> This superficial categorization ignores the complex network of distribution and collaboration that creates El Paquete in its many versions. This organizational structure is important because allows for a significant distribution of power and wealth within the development of this product. While there do exist hierarchical elements, they are much less restrictive than those that govern Netflix. Whereas Netflix is administered by one entity, the Netflix company, which also receives all profits, El Paquete distributes this administration and profit among its many actors. The Netflix comparison also eliminates the agency that actors in the network of El Paquete hold as creators/consumers. El Paquete is significantly more permeable to the values of consumers than Netflix.

El Paquete is neither an entirely democratic technology, nor does it follow an entirely centralized, unequal structure of wealth accumulation. Like any other technology, it is influenced by

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<sup>61</sup> Netflix is an online database of television shows and movies. It allows users with a subscription to access any of the media in this database. Popular media articles have compared El Paquete to Netflix. See the following: Harris, "This Is Cuba's Netflix, Hulu, and Spotify – All without the Internet - Vox."

the social structures and values of the society in which it exists. Its meaning and manifestation changes for every person who interacts with it depending on how they conceptualize it and the purpose it serves them. El Paquete operates in a certain way as a result of its inherent properties and the ways in which those properties interact with the values, interests, and social relationships of the individuals implementing this technology. In the same way, the Cuban government's administration of the Internet and other technologies results in certain manifestations of those technologies that reflect the interests of the state. The answer to the question of whether one of these manifestations is better than the other depends on an additional question, for whom? Some may herald El Paquete as a way to counteract the centrally-controlled Internet in Cuba, but it is important to recognize that El Paquete does not come without its own power structures that inhibit freedom for users.

Although the tendency may be to polarize conceptions of technologies, technologies rarely align to just one simplistic understanding. Technologies are not responsible for revolutions any more than they are a panacea for what some see as the illness of Communism. They occupy a space in between different poles of conceptualization, as they are no more binary or simplistic than the people or societies they interact with. El Paquete is another example of the need to analyze technologies from different frameworks and in relation to their local and global contexts in order to fully understand their use and manifestation.



### ***ENCOUNTER 3***

## **EL PAQUETE AND PIRACY**

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In 2015, U.S. and international pop star Taylor Swift issued cease and desist orders to fans attempting to sell merchandise printed with her lyrics on Etsy, an online marketplace primarily used for handmade and vintage items. A three-word phrase from the lyrics in her latest album printed on the coffee mugs for sale was under copyright, in addition to Swift's own name, initials, and several other phrases from her lyrics.<sup>62</sup> While many, including myself, may see this as a ridiculous exaggeration of the use of copyright and intellectual property law, the situation becomes ironic when we consider that the album, upon its release, was surely available in Cuba via El Paquete within a week with absolutely no royalty payments made to Ms. Swift.

Until this point, I have all but ignored an element of El Paquete that is most likely an obvious and pressing issue for many readers. As outlined in previous sections, El Paquete is a distribution network for digital media, most of which is pirated material from Global North countries. This kind of large-scale organized piracy network may seem shocking to those unfamiliar with media consumption in the Global South, and while still exceptional in many ways, it is not entirely unprecedented. For this reason, among others that I will explore here, I have avoided characterizing El Paquete as a piratical phenomenon up to this point, instead focusing on other aspects of its design and function that allow us to see El Paquete as a cultural, political and social entity and not just a legal one.

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<sup>62</sup> Jessica Contrera, "For Taylor Swift's Birthday, Should She Get to Trademark Her Birth Year?," *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/12/13/for-taylor-swifts-birthday-should-she-get-to-trademark-her-birth-year/>.

The example of Taylor Swift's action against her fans shows the extent to which both intellectual property and piracy are prevalent in our global society. As the authors of intellectual property stand to gain more and more from the restrictions on their material, information and communication technologies make the piracy of this material easier than ever before. If we look beyond the surface of this example, we can get a glimpse at how these terms and the principles from which they are constructed rely on global and local circumstances and power dynamics and understand the implications of intellectual property and piracy as more than incentive for innovation. For the Global South and marginalized communities within the Global North, intellectual property functions as a way to both exclude these areas from the distribution of knowledge and culture and to appropriate and profit from the knowledge and culture they produce.

#### THE POWER DYNAMICS OF COPYRIGHT LAW

Copyright and intellectual property law developed in Europe, based on systems of unequal power distribution that marginalized people of color and women.<sup>63</sup> It is little wonder then, that as these laws came to form the idea of Western 'property' that we know today, they also followed trajectories of imperialism and emerging capitalism, leading to the marginalization of certain populations within this system. This Western conceptualization of property became the global standard in 1994 with the TRIPS agreement, which required all World Trade Organization members to adhere to the same standards of copyright governance.<sup>64</sup> This meant that intellectual property law

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<sup>63</sup> Adam Haupt, "Interrogating Piracy: Race, Colonialism and Ownership," in *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2014), 179–92.

<sup>64</sup> Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz, *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2014).

now spread into global trade, as did the ways that intellectual property marginalized certain populations.<sup>65</sup>

Copyright and intellectual property have failed to provide the same protection for Global South culture and knowledge production as they do for the Global North. These legal frameworks also leave Global South populations out of the distribution networks of cultural material. Often, in countries of the Global South the cost of buying into legal networks of distribution is too high.<sup>66</sup> The idea behind copyright and intellectual property law is to foster creativity and innovation, which follows a logic that if there is no (financial) incentive to innovate there will be no innovation. However, this flip side of this is that too much protection limits legal access for those who cannot afford to buy in to the distribution network. For these individuals, the choice then become either not to consume the good at all or to find another, not legal way of doing so. Given these two options, most will chose the second.<sup>67</sup>

Copyright and intellectual property are also linked to imperialism, colonialism and notions of ‘property’ in the context of Western modernity. The promises of this modernity come contingent on adherence to a specific model of development, of which successfully harnessing intellectual property is one of the tenets.<sup>68</sup> Developed societies are expected to implement a system where intellectual property is created, distributed as commodity, and profited from. However, as the Global South has historically been excluded from global networks of intellectual property creation and distribution,

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<sup>65</sup> Shujen Wang, “Dreaming with BRICS?: On Piracy and Film Markets in Emerging Economies,” in *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2014), 99–118.

<sup>66</sup> Eckstein and Schwarz, *Postcolonial Piracy*.

<sup>67</sup> Madhavi Sunder, *From Goods to a Good Life: Intellectual Property and Global Justice* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Liang, “Beyond Representation: The Figure of the Pirate,” in *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2014), 49–77.

they are unable to successfully participate in this process. Thus, Global South countries are caught in a cycle of attempting to align with Western notions of modernity, not having the resources (financial or otherwise) to make their own intellectual property and exclusion from distribution networks, all of which create the opportunity and motivation for piracy to occur.

#### “OTHERING” PIRATES

I do not wish to say these are the only motivations for piracy. On the contrary, I want to acknowledge that there are many motivations for piracy, but given the background of copyright and intellectual property, we can see that this type of tension is what, much of the time, affects countries of the Global South, such as Cuba. Piracy that occurs in the Global South is subject to an “othering” by law and discourse in the Global North. As increasing digitality makes it easier and more appealing for individuals in U.S. and other Western countries to partake in piracy, there has to be a way to distinguish between U.S. college students downloading illegal mp3 files and commercial piracy networks in Asia and Latin America. The “Other” assigned to Global South pirates allows for this distinction.<sup>69</sup> Certain types of piracy, primarily those that occur in the Global South are separated from their social benefits and characterized as immoral and foreign individuals profiting off the work of Global North creators. In this way, the criminal pirate is seen as a non-white, non-Western individual with no desire to contribute to creativity or innovation.

This leads us to questions about technological access and citizenship in the Global South. There is much scholarship available that addresses the “digital divide” and unequal access to digital information. Many initiatives and organizations exist that are aimed at reducing the gap between the “connected” and the “disconnected.” In the implementation of these strategies, however, the access

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

that these disconnected populations receive comes with certain conditions, rather than being unrestricted and allowing users to decide on their own terms how they want to use the access. The access must fit within certain moral or other idealistic standards, and also within a certain class framework. Lawrence Liang describes the imposition of class constraints in an interaction, recalled by Rancière, between Victor Hugo and a working class poet.

[W]hen Victor Hugo was shown a poem written by a worker, his embarrassed and patronizing response was, ‘In your fine verse there is something more than fine verse. There is a strong soul, a lofty heart, a noble and robust spirit. Carry on. Always be what you are: poet and worker. That is to say, thinker and worker.’ This is a classic instance of what Rancière would term an ‘exclusion by homage’. Thus, the aspirations and desires of the poor have to be ‘something more than fine verse’, and the information needs of the poor have to be something more than wanting to watch a film or even dreaming of becoming a filmmaker.<sup>70</sup>

Hugo is tying this individual to their class and position within society. The individual is not allowed to aspire to be a poet, but rather a working class poet that it constantly thinking of their class struggle. In a similar way, Cuban citizens are not only consumers of media but also political agents. The popular media analysis of *El Paquete* relies heavily on rhetoric of “democracy” and freeing the Cuban people from the “oppressive” Castro regime. In this way, the case of Cuba and *El Paquete* diverges from the typical rhetoric of digital inclusion. Pirates in this case are not seen as criminal figures because they are subverting a government which does not align with U.S. ideals and has a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

history of defying U.S. intervention. These Cubans pirates are instead viewed as rebels upholding (US notions of) democracy and freedom.

This conceptual switch, however, does not mean that Cubans have authority to access digital media on their own terms. While those who participate in the network of El Paquete have thus far been free from any criminalization, rhetoric of access is still shaped by moral and idealistic notions. These notions dictate of what kind of information people should access and how. Digital inclusion strategies are often based on these kind of value judgments. Take this example from a digital intervention in Bangalore:

An NGO in Bangalore that works in the field of information and communication technologies for development was conducting a workshop on accessing the internet for the information needs of rural women working to empower other poor rural women in India. The facilitator guided the women through the basics of the internet, including how to access information relevant to their work, which ranges from providing access to credit to promoting women's health. The training was highly appreciated, and all the women volunteers seemed to be enjoying themselves while fiddling with the computers and exploring the internet. At the end of the training, when the NGO started cleaning up the computers, including the browsing histories and the cached copies of the sites accessed, they were a little aghast to find that most of the women volunteers had been surfing pornography – and a range of pornography at that. So while the trainers were holding forth eloquently about the real information needs of the poor, the poor were quite happy to access their real information needs.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

While a comical anecdote in itself, this situation shows how the knowledge and information needs of marginalized and exploited populations are dictated by others who wield access and power, allowing them to utilize certain bodies as tools in carrying out the goals of the those in power. In the case of Cuba, those goals are the hegemonic values of United States government. In the same way that the Cuban government sees Cuban citizens as political agents to uphold the ideals of the Revolution, the United States sees them as a way to undermine the state authority that has resisted U.S. intervention for so long. Either way, as far as media consumption is concerned, Cuban citizens are not free, but rather bound by the interests of government authorities.

#### SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PIRACY

Scholarship on piracy allows us to examine intellectual property as a tool for the inclusion and/or exclusion of certain individuals and populations based on criteria determined by global hegemonic powers. However, I want to step away from this focus and examine how framing piracy solely within the window of intellectual property ignores many aspects of piratic phenomena that impact the networks they create and the societies in which they are embedded. Previous to this section, I avoided characterizing El Paquete as a piracy network because that characterization privileges discourse around the economic benefit/loss of Western media producers and misses the opportunity to discuss the other cultural, social and political implications of this digital media distribution network.

The current conception of intellectual property excludes Global South and other marginalized populations from the system, but it also ignores the social benefits that exist in participatory cultures. The 2005 court case of *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. v. Grokster* became a legal precedent for the relationship between digital distribution and copyright infringement. Grokster was a peer-to-peer file sharing service that allowed users to share files among other people

instead of through a central server, which is the way services like Napster operated. A case was made for the creative and innovative potential that Grokster held, but the Court decided against the software company on the basis of morality and ethics. Copyright law as it exists did not allow the Court to understand the benefits of sharing and participatory culture.

Similarly, by framing conversations of piracy networks in the Global South around intellectual property and copyright infringement, we lose the framework to talk about the participatory culture involved in these networks. In El Paquete, pirated albums of superstars from the United States are distributed next to music videos from up-and-coming Cuban reggaetón artists. In fact, there is more Cuban music than foreign music available in El Paquete. Vistar Magazine, a Cuban periodical created and developed within the network of El Paquete, is now an important publication for the Cuban pop culture scene both on the island and abroad. El Paquete also functions as an advertising space for Cubans, both with the offline classified ad site *Revolico* and ads placed independently with distributors of El Paquete. El Paquete is part of a greater file sharing culture in Cuba around which there are social rules and vocabulary. In many different ways, El Paquete is becoming an important space for Cuban creativity and innovation. El Paquete and its content shapes what media Cubans consume and the ways in which they do so.

As the relationship between the United States and Cuba begins to change, this Cuban file sharing culture could change, if intellectual property is not reexamined and reframed. For more than fifty years, an embargo has existed between the two countries, meaning that concerns around piracy went unaddressed. Non-state piracy, as we have seen is prevalent, but the Cuban government has also participated. US films and television shows are regularly shown on Cuban television and in movie theaters, without any royalty payments for US artists. If diplomatic relations are reinstated, this practice could come under fire by the US government, and initiate a crackdown on piracy in Cuba at large. This would have detrimental effects for the sharing culture that has developed in



Cuba. It is possible that some Cubans are already anticipating this change. Influential individuals in El Paquete's network have recently stated their intentions to transition El Paquete into a tool for Cuban marketing, and move away from its focus on distributing media.<sup>72</sup>

As of the present, and for the near future, El Paquete plays a critical role in the landscape of Cuban consumption, creativity and innovation. It has implications for Cuban citizens, the Cuban state and other global powers with interest in the country. Given what is at stake, it is important not to flatten the multidimensionality of El Paquete by adhering to a framework of intellectual property that ignores the social benefits created by participatory cultures. Similarly, strict adherence to any one framework of analysis, intellectual or otherwise, threatens to diminish our understanding of El Paquete and its current importance in Cuba. We must think critically, but also broadly about the meanings and implications of this phenomenon.

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<sup>72</sup> Adam Popescu, "Cuba's Startup Paradox," *TechCrunch*, October 5, 2015, <http://techcrunch.com/2015/10/06/cubas-startup-paradox/>.

## CONCLUSION

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In the previous sections, I demonstrated El Paquete as a fluid technology that, in its implementation, reflects the interests of various stakeholders, including the Cuban state, Cuban citizens, and the United States government. Additionally, it stands as one of the principle ways that Cubans access the media they choose to consume. Given this current state of importance in Cuban society, it seems relevant to consider a possible future for El Paquete. This is not an easy task, however, taking into account the moving boundaries of El Paquete, its potential for rapid evolution, the ever-changing circumstances of Internet access in Cuba, and recent changes in the relationship between the United States and Cuba. El Paquete could change entirely or disappear altogether at a moment's notice. If the individuals responsible for bringing the digital contents of El Paquete to Cuba decide to halt their operations, El Paquete will no longer be able to function as it currently does. In the current moment, El Paquete is an important source of entertainment for a large percentage of Cubans and a way to earn substantial income for many. Most consumers of El Paquete do not have access to another means of obtaining the same kind of vast media offerings available in El Paquete. Though the state has attempted to increase television offerings in the recent past, its effort have thus far not been enough.<sup>73</sup> As long as the Cuban state fails to provide adequate media offerings and Cuban citizens are unable to supplement those offerings in another way, El Paquete will continue to have a place in the Cuban media market.

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<sup>73</sup> Lisandra Díaz Padrón and Claudio Peláez Sordo, "The World in a Package," *Progreso Semanal*, April 3, 2014, <http://progresoweekly.us/world-package/>.

If any one of these factors does change, it is uncertain what will happen to El Paquete. Cuba has taken great strides to increase Internet access by opening more public Wi-Fi spaces and lowering the price of connection. While widely-available Internet access in Cuba is far off, increased access to better quality connections will surely affect El Paquete. But even in a future where the majority of Cubans have access to the Internet, El Paquete retains its usefulness. The accumulation of one terabyte of information on a weekly basis is a lofty task, even in the most connected of societies. If Cubans begin to receive Internet connections in their homes, El Paquete could still function as a way to access large offerings of entertainment material, without the intensive individual labor required to download all those files from the Internet. However, the fact that most Cubans consume only a fraction of the offerings available to them in El Paquete reduces this potential for future use. It is important to consider that Internet access for the majority of the population in Cuba will not, in all probability, come in the near future. For the time being, El Paquete remains an efficient way for Cubans to receive a wide variety of digital media offerings.

The function of El Paquete is additionally dependent on the few individuals who obtain the information that makes up its contents. One of these individuals, Elio Lopez, who has recently received international attention as one of the “founders” of El Paquete, says his future plan for El Paquete is to focus on advertising. Advertising is already seen in El Paquete, but Lopez wants to expand this by serving as a sort of advertising agency that would design digital advertisements for Cuban businesses.<sup>74</sup> A similar approach is seen with Vistar magazine, which serves not only to create and publish content in its e-magazine, but also works with businesses, musical stars, and others with the financial resources to design a brand image and create promotional material.<sup>75</sup> This transition

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<sup>74</sup> Popescu, “Cuba’s Startup Paradox.”

<sup>75</sup> Abbie Galloway, Interview with Robin Pedraja, January 18, 2016.

would allow El Paquete to exist in a future with more access to digital media, but could potentially lead to other changes in the content and the way consumers interact with the technology.

The changing relationship between the United States and Cuba will also affect the future of El Paquete and technological development in Cuba more broadly. President Obama has made significant changes during his two terms in office and if the US decides to continue these changes, there is no doubt they will have significant effects for the island, including the realm of Internet access. During his visit to the island in March 2016, President Obama announced during that Google had recently made a deal with Cuba to increase Wi-Fi and broadband access across the country.<sup>76</sup> As of now, the US rhetoric surrounding Internet access in Cuba is tainted with anti-Communist sentiments and the desire to erode the Castro regime's power. The US envisions Internet access as a way to do this, by allowing Cubans to access information outside of what their government is willing to give them. The Cuban state envisions this same access as its citizens being bombarded with US hegemonic material. Neither of these conceptions includes Cuban citizens as active participants in determining how Internet access will develop in Cuba.

If Cuba wants to participate in the global economy, it is inevitable that Internet access will continue to increase and improve. The relationship between the United States and Cuba will affect this access and its implementation. If the United States is interested in creating free and democratic Internet access for Cubans, it should begin by examining its own motivations. The US should prioritize the expressed needs and desires of Cuban citizens, instead of privileging its own agenda. That would require a digital inclusion strategy that positions Cubans as individuals with the agency to decide the reasons they want Internet access and the ways in which they will use that access, instead of pawns in a project to weaken the control of the Cuban state and insert US authority into

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<sup>76</sup> Claire Zillman, "Obama Says Google Has a Deal To Expand Internet Access in Cuba," *Fortune*, March 21, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/03/21/obama-cuba-internet-google/>.

yet another Global South country. This approach would, arguably, require a reexamination of the entire US agenda towards Cuba and its motivations to renew relations.

This case study of El Paquete allows us to imagine technologies not just as physical and digital elements that allow us to complete certain tasks, but as products of various social contexts. Technologies come embedded with certain values and ideals of these social contexts, which in turn affect their use and implementation. Technologies are tools that can be manipulated by certain parties to carry out their goals, which may not serve in the best interests of everyone. Digital access strategies also reflect social contexts and come attached with ideologies of their creators. Given that digital access strategies are not often designed by those to whom the strategies are attempting to give access, these ideologies may not align with the needs and desires of populations with less digital access. Technologies are not separate from societies, but rather they are a product of those societies, and within them is written the same hierarchies and power dynamics. Technologies may be used to oppress just as easily as they are used to liberate. We cannot imagine technology as the panacea for social problems, but rather we must reexamine the societal structures that create these problems and the technologies themselves.

## ***APPENDIX 1***

### **SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

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The following interview outlines represents a sample of the questions I would ask during my research interviews. Although the interviews varied based on the interviewee and this one is specific to the writer and cultural critic, Victor Fowler, it represents the typical structure of the interviews I conducted. Additionally, the questions were asked in Spanish, but I have chosen to provide the English translations here.

Interviewer: Abbie Galloway

Interviewee: Victor Fowler

Date: August 17, 2015

Place: Havana, Cuba

Q1: In your opinion, what is the historical context of El Paquete? What factors contribute to the existence of El Paquete?

Q2: Of what I have read, you have said a lot about the right of Cubans to be banal. Could you talk about this?

Q3: How does the opinion of the state influence the opinion of the people in regard to popular culture and El Paquete?

Q3: What do you think about Mi Mochila that they are distributing in the Joven Clubs? Is this an appropriate response by the state to El Paquete? How should the response of the government be different?

Q4: What is El Paquete compared to the Internet in Cuba? Is it a response to the lack of Internet or is it entirely independent?

Q5: What is the context of the Internet in Cuba today? How is it going to change in the next two, five or ten years? How will that affect El Paquete?

Q6: If there were to be more access and understanding of the Internet in Cuba, do you think El Paquete would continue to exist?

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