



Blogs Increasingly Serve as Forum for Government Critics in Cuba

A small but growing number of bloggers who appear to be writing from Cuba are using externally hosted websites to voice dissent and developing inventive ways to circumvent government restrictions on Internet access that limit their freedom to post. While the blogs' emergence has coincided with the move toward more openness in state media about discussing social and economic problems in the past two years, the bloggers go well beyond that limited criticism by blaming the ruling system rather than individuals or external pressure. The government thus far largely has acted indirectly against the bloggers, warning about the dangers of the Internet and reportedly blocking access to a host website. The bloggers tend to express pessimism about prospects for change under Raul Castro, but they currently are not promoting a specific political agenda or calling for any organized movement against the government. Although readership is mostly international, their on-island audience -- including possible imitators -- is likely to increase if access to information technology becomes more widespread. See the appendices for details on Internet access in Cuba and the individual blogs discussed.

Cuba's independent blogs have increased in recent years, providing a forum to voice discontent with current conditions and government policies that goes further than the still-limited discussion of problems in state media.

- The number of blogs written by private Cuban citizens began increasing significantly in late 2006 and has gained momentum since. Of the 11 most prominent independent blogs, one began in 2005, three in 2006, three in 2007, and four since the beginning of 2008.
- Some readers have questioned the bloggers' credibility, charging them with being either agents of the Cuban Government or Miami-based Cubans. The personal nature of the postings and the absence of an explicit political agenda, however, bolster their claims to be private citizens.
- The increase in independent bloggers parallels a move by state media toward more openness about problems on the island, which began in late 2006 and was further encouraged by Raul Castro's call for more critical discussion about conditions in Cuba (Cubavision, 26 July 2007, 24 September 2007).¹

¹ For information about state media's move to discuss problems more openly, see the 21 March OSC Analysis, **Cuba -- State TV Steps Up Focus on Problems, Stays Within Redlines** (LAF20080321467001) and the 9 April OSC Analysis, **Cuban Daily's Focus on Problems Shifts To Rally Support for System** (LAF20080409467001).

The bloggers demonstrate technological savvy in overcoming the Internet access restrictions to create their blogs, but they appear to have difficulty updating them regularly.

- While she has not disclosed details in her blog, *Generacion Y's* Yoani Sanchez, Cuba's most prominent blogger, has described in interviews with foreign outlets how she writes blog entries, saves them on a flash memory drive, and uploads them at an Internet cafe (*The New York Times*, 6 March; *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 December 2007).
- The apparently short-lived *Potro Salvaje* -- whose title "Wild Colt" appears to mock Communications Minister Valdes's warning in February 2007 that the Internet was a "wild colt" that needed to be controlled (www.cubaminrex.cu) -- began on 11 March to provide explicit instructions to on-island Internet users about methods to bypass restrictions. The blog's most recent post on 8 April highlighted the importance of the flash drive to transport data from one computer to another on the island.
- Although many of the blogs are updated frequently, maintenance can be inconsistent -- several have been abandoned or moved without notice. Two of the 11 blogs have not been updated since February 2008, despite having had regular posts prior.

Spotlight on Yoani Sanchez



(www.desdecuba.com/generaciony)

Yoani Sanchez is one of two on-island bloggers to write under her real name, likely one of the factors contributing to the extensive foreign media attention she has received (Reinaldo Escobar, her husband and author of the blog *Desde Aqui* also writes under his real name). Sanchez's blog *Generacion Y* consists of pithy commentary about life in Cuba and has become the most widely read of the on-island blogs. In March, *Generacion Y* reached 4 million hits, with several posts receiving more than 1,000 comments.

Sanchez has been featured in several well-known foreign publications, and on 4 April, she was awarded the Ortega y Gasset prize in Digital Journalism, one of Spain's top journalism awards. She wrote in her blog on 3 May that the government has not granted her the permits necessary to travel to Spain to accept it. *Time* named her in its 2008 list of "100 Most Influential People," released on the Internet on 2 May and published in its 6 May issue.

Not all of the attention has been positive, however. *Rebellion*, a leftist website based in Spain, published an attack on the blog which was featured on *Por Cuba*, a web page hosted by Cuban Government-sponsored Cubarte, and on other left-leaning online forums (26 March).

In addition to her international audience, Sanchez said in a 27 April Associated Press interview that so many Cubans now read her blog that fans stop her on the street. She is frequently referenced in comments posted to other blogs, and many of the sites she has linked to have benefited from her popularity, showing significant increases in comments.

The Cuban Government appears to have taken an indirect approach to limiting the influence of independent bloggers. It has warned of the dangers of the Internet, and bloggers charge it with monitoring the contents of their blogs and making it difficult to access the blogs.

- In addition to calling the Internet a "wild colt," Valdes said it was "a tool for global extermination" (www.cubaminrex.cu). Youth daily *Juventud Rebelde* has warned that portable storage devices such as flash drives increase vulnerability to computer viruses (17 April), and Fidel Castro asserted in a letter to the National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC) Conference that the Internet and other information technologies are invasions of privacy (*Granma*, 2 April).
- In March, several of the blogs that share the Frankfurt-based *Consenso Desde Cuba* host website claimed the government was obstructing on-island access. *Potro Salvaje* charged on 26 March that the site had been filtered to slow loading "to a maximum," making the page impossible to view by most on-island Internet users since 20 March. (See [Appendix A](#) for details on Internet access in Cuba.) *Generacion Y* and *Desde Aqui* accused the government of censorship at a time when it promised more openness (24 March).
- The author of *Sin EVAsion* claimed that officials monitor the *Consenso Desde Cuba* site and had recruited surrogates to post pro-government comments on the blogs, especially *Generacion Y* (1 April).

The bloggers generally see little prospect for far-reaching change under Raul Castro but give no indication that they are seeking to promote any popular opposition movement against him.

- *Bajo Una Ceiba Habanera* blogger "Oswaldo Yanez" wrote that "there will be no changes in the tyrannical system" after the National Assembly on 24 February formally named Raul Castro as president (27 February). *Generacion Y* and *Desde Aqui* also expressed disappointment with the move as well as with the absence of substantial results after his inaugural speech (26, 25 February, 24 March).
- *Potro Salvaje's* author said Cubans would not be content with the limited lifting of restrictions that have been announced (14 March).² *Sin EVAsion's* author said Cubans would only respond to calls to improve productivity if they saw the fruit of their labor (8 March).
- Thus far, blogs have not been used as a forum to organize an overt movement against the government. The authors of *Desde Aqui* and *Bajo Una Ceiba Habanera* -- the most outspoken of the bloggers in calling for protests -- have stated that they do not openly support or engage in dissident activities (5 February, 24 April).

² For more information about Cuban treatment of Raul Castro's policy changes, see the 25 April OSC Analysis, **Cuba: State Media Largely Downplay Policy Moves** (LAF20080425380001)

Cuban Journalist Blogs

The Cuban Journalists Union lists 184 blogs written by its members. Although some have archives dating back to 2005, many have not been updated recently.

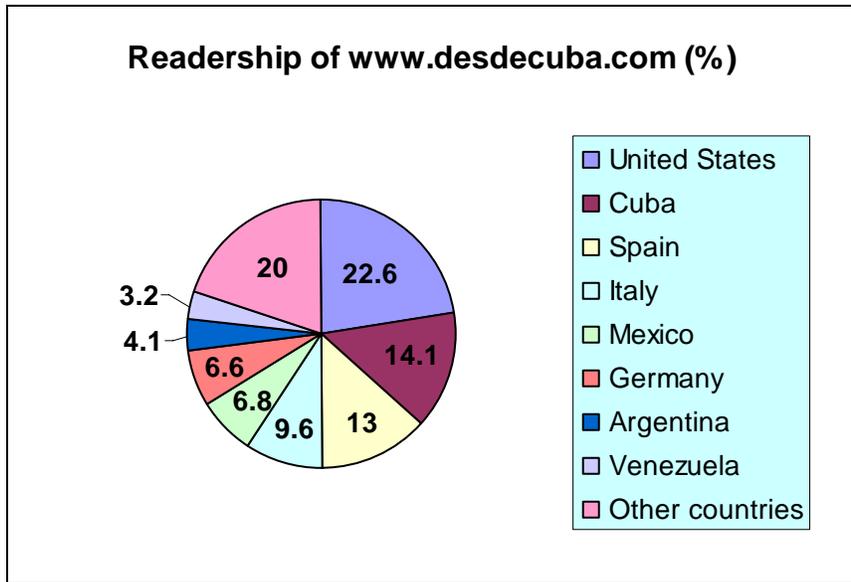
These blogs typically deal with historical or current events as well as sports and cultural activities and echo the government line on topics such as global warming and international trade. They often are regionally or topically specific.

Juventud Rebelde features three blogs written by its contributors, among them *Gente, Hechos, Cosas* [People, Doings, Things] by Luis Sexto, a prominent journalist and moderator on Radio Rebelde's "Straight Talk" program.^a Although Sexto's commentaries generally have stayed within government redlines, he is the most outspoken of the prominent journalist bloggers in discussing conditions on the island, occasionally even extending his criticism to the socialist system and governmental inefficiencies.

^a For information on "Straight Talk's" treatment of on-island problems, see the 18 May 2007 OSC Analysis, **Cuba: Radio Talk Show Points to Growing Popular Discontent** (LAF20070518465001).

The bloggers voice more optimism about longer-term prospects for change and the ability of information technology to help bring it about.

- Sanchez said that it was her Cuban readers who alerted her to problems accessing her blog and that this, as well as the rapid dissemination of a video of a student at the Information Sciences University questioning National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon in January, shows that the Internet is "impossible to turn off" and that state media were no longer the only source of information on the island (26 March, 20 February).
- The *Bitacora Cubana* blogger wrote that information technology has made it "practically impossible to conceal reality" and that it is the increasing use of the Internet that eventually will lead to an opening in Cuba (20 February).
- On-island readers appear to represent a sizeable minority of the blogs' audience; traffic from Cuba accounts for about 14% of *Consenso Desde Cuba's* readers (www.alexacom). The number is likely to grow in the wake of the lifting of restrictions on sales of computers and cell phones.



Consenso Desde Cuba (www.desdecuba.com) features six on-island blogs including the well-known Generacion Y blog. The "other countries" category includes all countries that have less than 3% of the site's readership. This data was obtained on 7 May from the web tracking site at www.alexa.com.

Outlook

Although the bloggers currently do not appear to be having a significant impact on dissident activities on the island, their writings could help keep Cuba in the international spotlight and potentially attract new sources of off-island political and financial support for government critics. The blog postings also could serve as a way of justifying and rallying support for an organized on-island opposition, even if the bloggers themselves do not head such a movement.

The government likely will continue indirect efforts to rein in the blogs, impeding access and harassing identified authors. If, however, the blogs appear to have an impact on opposition efforts -- either through promoting an anti-government agenda or spurring an independent movement -- the government likely will act directly by overtly blocking their sites, publicly vilifying the bloggers and their postings, or taking legal action against them.

Appendix A: Internet in Cuba

Cuba blames the US embargo for its slow and expensive service and claims that the restricted, monitored access it allows is to protect Cubans; users face prison time if caught accessing the Internet from a tourist hotel or posting "subversive" comments on a foreign page.

- According to Internet World Stats, Internet penetration in Cuba was 2.1% of a population of 11.3 million in 2007, the lowest in Latin America. Cuban Government figures claim that 27% of the Cuban population has access to the Internet (www.cubaminrex.cu). The *Bitacora Cubana* and *Generacion Y* bloggers have said the government inflates statistics on Internet access by including figures on intranet access (29, 27 October 2007).
- Cuba accesses the Internet through a satellite connection with 65 Mbps broadband for output and 124 Mbps for input. The government claims the US embargo prevents Cuba from connecting to nearby underwater fiber optic cables. On 24 January 2007, Venezuela and Cuba signed an agreement for the construction of a new 1,552 kilometer underwater fiber optic cable between the two countries to be completed in 2009 (www.cubaminrex.cu).
- Since charges at Internet cafes aimed at tourists are prohibitively expensive for most Cubans, many Cubans attempt to buy passwords on the black market, and those with private access rent out time slots to those without. The penalty for using the Internet illegally is 5 years in prison, and climbs to 20 years for writing "counterrevolutionary" articles on foreign websites (www.freedomhouse.org, 2007).

Internet vs. Intranet in Cuba		
Internet^b	Intranet	E-mail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in some tourist hotels and Internet cafes; most private connections are banned by government • "Subversive" sites are blocked by the Cuban Government redirecting the user to another site • Can cost around \$4.50 per hour, about half the average monthly wage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in Internet cafes and from private, sometimes illegal, intranet connections • Limited to primarily Cuban national websites including <i>Prensa Latina</i>, <i>Granma</i>, and <i>Cubavision</i> • Can cost around \$1.50 per hour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in Internet cafes • Some Cubans including doctors, some artists, and some athletes have private access from their homes which is screened by the Cuban Government (<i>Bitacora Cubana</i>, 1 November)
<p>^b For more information on the Internet in Cuba, see the 1 March 2007 OSC Media Aid, Cuba Media Guide 2007 (LAF20070301463001).</p>		

(*Freedom House 2007 Annual Report*, www.freedomhouse.org; *Reporters Without Borders 2006 and 2008 reports*, www.rsf.org)

Appendix B: Profiles of Leading Independent Blogs



Yoani Sanchez says her blog, *Generación Y*, is written for those born in the 1970's and 1980's during a trend of names beginning with "Y." Sanchez, founder of *Consenso Desde Cuba*, has a background in philology and computer science and returned to Cuba in 2004 from Switzerland where she lived for two years.

- Sanchez focuses on the prohibitions, limitations, and intolerance that affect daily life in Cuba and contrasts them with government messages. She says that Cubans are adept at reading between the lines, and she is skeptical of government calls for debate and promises of change (5 October 2007, 20 November 2007, 23 January, 27 March).
- She emphasizes the power of technology and the Internet as a vehicle to find tolerance, unity, and freedom (1 April) and expresses the hope that the next generation will be able to bring about change (30 January, 27 October 2007).

Site Information

Established: April 2007
Location: Havana
Hosting Site: *Consenso Desde Cuba* registered in Frankfurt, Germany
Author: Yoani Sanchez
Sites Linking to Blog: 15,700
URL: www.desdecuba.com/generaciony



Reinaldo Escobar describes himself as an independent journalist writing from Cuba on topics not found in state media in his blog *Desde Aquí* [From Here]. Escobar is married to Sanchez and works with her on *Consenso Desde Cuba*. His last post was on 24 March.

- *Desde Aquí* focuses on the political landscape in Cuba and regularly criticizes the current leadership and the Cuban version of communism (10 December 2007, 24 January, 25 February, 24 March).
- Escobar also calls on the Cuban people to overcome their "fears" and join together to try to solve the larger societal problems needed for changes to take place on the island (5 February, 26, 24 January).

Site Information

Established: 10 December 2007
Location: Havana
Hosting Site: *Consenso Desde Cuba* registered in Frankfurt, Germany
Author: Reinaldo Escobar
Sites Linking to Blog: 959
URL: www.desdecuba.com/reinaldoescobar

Potro Salvaje claims on its home page that it is dedicated to "the thorny issue of the Internet in Cuba" and provides information on accessing the Internet in Cuba as well as methods of overcoming restrictions. The blog is featured on *Consenso Desde Cuba* and was last updated on 8 April. Its author is anonymous.



- Several posts provide links for downloading software. On 27 March, the blog provided the link to access a manual and software program that would allow users to circumvent Internet navigation restrictions and a link posted on 14 March directed readers to a website offering software that would help protect Cuban bloggers' identities.
- The blog features a list of blocked websites in Cuba and helps readers to determine if their sites are blocked. The author welcomed the end of restrictions on purchasing computers, but he continues to call for increased access to the Internet and to urge tourists to provide information about Cuba's cyber cafes (11, 14 March).

Site Information

Established: 11 March 2008
Location: Cuba
Hosting Site: *Consenso Desde Cuba* registered in Frankfurt, Germany
Author: Anonymous
Sites Linking to Blog: 3,080
URL: www.desdecuba.com/potro

"Eva Gonzales," author pseudonym for the *Sin EVAsion* [Without Evasion] blogger, also writes for *Encuentro en la Red* -- an online publication of a Madrid-based exile group. The blog, featured on *Consenso Desde Cuba*, highlights restrictions and limitations in Cuba.



- She frequently discusses unfair treatment and inequality she says she encounters when trying to enter certain restaurants, the theater, or a new theme park or even to sit on a bench in front of the capital building (5, 19 February, 28 January).
- She also has complained that she was unable to vote in the National Assembly elections because her name was not on the voters list (5 February).

Site Information

Established: 27 January 2008

Location: Havana

Hosting Site: *Consenso Desde Cuba* registered in Frankfurt, Germany

Author: Anonymous blogger pseudonym "Eva Gonzales"

Sites linking to blog: 531

URL: www.desdecuba.com/sin_evasion



The author of *Bajo Una Ceiba Habanera* [Under a Havana Kapok Tree] posts under the pseudonym "Oswaldo Yanez." His frequent use of Latin and religious references point to a

possible connection with the Catholic Church but may limit the blog's popular appeal. His postings focus on human rights issues and call on citizens to confront government abuses.

- He asserts there "is no freedom or respect for human rights" in Cuba nor any "fair trial nor humanitarian treatment" for prisoners (10 December 2007, 24 March).
- He has praised dissidents such as Darsi Ferrer and the Ladies in White and has urged Cubans to support them (10 December 2007, 1 April). He also urged citizens to write the word "change" on their ballots in the National Assembly elections (12 January).

Site Information

Established: February 2007
Location: Havana
Hosting Site: *Conexion Cubana* registered in
Cintruenigo, Spain
Author: Anonymous blogger
pseudonym "Oswaldo Yanez"
Sites Linking to Blog: 2,090
URL: www.conexioncubana.net/blogs/oswaldo

The author of *Bitacora Cubana* [Cuban Blog] goes by the pseudonym "Karamchand," probably referring to Mahatma Gandhi's middle name. The blogger often disputes government claims but expresses more optimism than other bloggers about the prospects for change in the short term.



- Many postings address the "lies" and "shams" of the Cuban regime, such as its health-care system's record, compliance with UN human rights covenants, and the National Assembly election process (7, 18, 25 December 2007).
- He wrote that 2008 will bring "change, progress, and the light at the end of the tunnel" (25 December 2007). He also described Fidel Castro's decision to resign as president as encouraging (20 February).

Site Information

Established: November 2006
Location: Havana
Hosting Site: Markmonitor Inc. registered in
California, US
Author: Anonymous blogger
pseudonym "Karamchand"
Sites Linking to Blog: 5,050
URL: cubabit.blogspot.com

Other Independent On-Island Blogs	
Blog Name, URL	Content
<p><i>Retazos</i> www.desdecuba.com/retazos</p>	<p><i>Bits and Pieces</i>, hosted on <i>Consenso Desde Cuba</i>, is a literary blog which discusses Cuban writers and Cuba's social and political situation. The first post was on 24 January; the most recent update was on 22 April.</p>
<p><i>El Blog de Dimas</i> www.desdecuba.com/dimas</p>	<p><i>Dimas's Blog</i>, hosted on <i>Consenso Desde Cuba</i>, is a social and political blog on topics including the government-sanctioned "debates" in 2007 and the closing of Cuban sugar refineries in 2003. The blog appears to have been short-lived; the first entry is dated 17 January and the last 18 February.</p>
<p><i>Mi isla al mediodia</i> isla12pm.blogspot.com</p>	<p><i>My Island at Midday</i> is registered in the United States. The blogger writes on political and social issues in Cuba and criticizes the government. The blog's first posts were in October 2005, but the blogger stopped updating in February and announced the creation of a new blog in an undisclosed space. <i>Generation Y's</i> Yoani Sanchez called this blog her inspiration in an 8 April interview with an online Madrid-based Cuban exile publication (www.cubaencuentro.com).</p>
<p><i>Cuba Catolica</i> cubacatolica.blogcindario.com</p>	<p><i>Catholic Cuba</i> is registered in Spain and claims to be written by members of Cuba's Catholic Church. Entries focus on religion, but some address Cuban politics. One entry discussed a possible "opening" in the Cuban media for the Church, and another debated what should come first in Cuba: freedom or stability. The blog's first entries are from June 2006, and the most recent is from April.</p>
<p><i>Havanascity</i> havanascity.blogspot.com</p>	<p>This photo blog mainly features shots of Cuban streets and buildings; few show people. Readers, who seem to be non-Cuban, regularly comment on the postings. The blog started in September 2006, and the last update was in March.</p>