

Henken, Ted A., and Sara García Santamaría, eds. *Cuba's Digital Revolution: Citizen Innovation and State Policy*. University Press of Florida, 2021. 348 pp.

TOLOO RIAZI
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Cuba's Digital Revolution: Citizen Innovation and State Policy is a collection of fourteen essays divided in five parts: “History, Media, and Technology,” “Politics,” “Journalism,” “Business and Economy,” and “Culture and Society.” Although all the chapters and parts are thematically connected, they also can be read independently—the relations between structural power, identity, political agents, and experience bind chapters into one collective frame. The volume begins by tracing access to the Internet in Cuba, as one of the “leading Caribbean nations in pre-Internet international networking” (42) in a historical context. *Cuba's Digital Revolution* provides the reader with a detailed history of journalism and digital mass media in Cuba, particularly shedding light on the singular course of history under Fidel Castro and the impact of his famous “Words to the Intellectuals,” which truncated the possible unfolding of other voices and socio-cultural identities. Digital media is also viewed from the angle of Marxist-Leninist conception of freedom. In line with Marx, Castro recognized freedom as “subordinated to the consolidation and advancement of the new regime” (98). Hence, individuated use of digital media and customization of information became an assertion of defiance and challenge.

For years and generations, the voice and visage of Fidel Castro and the so-called “revolutionaries” blanketed Cuba. The “in-between” voices were under the control of the official narrative, which held that all mass media were state property, therefore, an independent digital media was by default illegal (182), with only two forms of ownership: “state” and “socialist” (109). The state’s legitimacy and the “hegemony of the state’s self-legitimizing discourse” (123) are imperative. The government uses the war on terror, fear, monopoly, and violence to reconstruct its images that lend legitimacy to its structure of power and restrict citizen’s capacity to imagine, think, and write (120). “State security bodies, state media, and official blogs” (103) are some of the tools in hands of the government to question the legitimacy of independent media.

However, the ideological discourse of state is challenged through the media. The manuscript reveals different aspects of Internet in Cuba and throws considerable light on the impact of political tensions between Cuba and the United States on the development of the Internet in Cuba.

Revolutionary Cuba made use of the media for propaganda and surveillance, in addition to the transmission of ideological intents of the state. The essays reveal the extent of the state's intrusion into the private lives and desires of the people, and the law-making control that aids the state in maintaining power over the people. Evidence of silenced voices and the repressive state are displayed throughout the volume. However, as the collection states, the technology creates new voices and alternative information that challenges mainstream information and assumptions. The political changes in 2008, alongside with the gradual expansion of Internet access, are considered to be crucial moments in the gradual formation of a more diverse and inclusive public space. In contrast to the public sphere that is subject to the government's monopoly, the digital revolution has created new forms of interstitial space that do not exclusively belong to Castro and his followers. Online activism, blogging, journalism, active citizen participation, entrepreneurs, and online marketing are among the many forms of social mobilization discussed in the collection. This "informational, communicational, and technological revolution" is referred to as "Cuba's digital revolution" (2) in this manuscript, and this so-called digital revolution gives the citizens visibility and the opportunity to participate in creating alternative forms of knowledge and rearranging the hierarchy of power and transforming the Cuban society from within (2). The use of digital media has become a battleground to "help 'level the playing field' between authoritarian governments (or even dominant and monopolistic corporations) and marginalized citizens—whether they be Russian voters, Chinese dissidents, or Cuban bloggers" (10). Under the current circumstances, the future of digital media on the island depends on the "arbitrary tolerance and goodwill of the government and the ever-resourceful efforts of its managers" (110).

Similarly, the collection analyzes citizens' behavior, such as self-censorship and paranoia, that is sometimes molded into conformity with the preferences of the regime. At the same time, the collection aims to disentangle different meanings and scopes of digital revolution and show that digital revolution is nothing if the real-life consequences of resistance are overlooked:

simplifying narratives that equate journalistic alterity with political opposition, overlooking the complex processes of identification, co-optation, negotiation, and resistance in which Cuban journalists operate, at both a personal and a professional level. (196)

Thus, the Cuban digital revolution is analyzed by embedding the digital media and its socio-cultural effects within the complex matrix of power relations and identity struggle inherent in totalitarian regimes, such as Cuba.

The collection takes a very multidisciplinary approach and studies this subject using different theoretic approaches and disciplines such as interviews and empirical research. The manuscript weaves together themes of dispute, repression, social activism, and ideology to illustrate the Cuban society of today where the official narrative silences the alternative discourse and knowledge, and citizens are learning to skillfully use digital media as an agent of change.