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Leveraging Technology to Support Free Access to Information in Cuba

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The Cuban people, living within the constricted space permitted by the 53-year-old Cuban Revolution, have not benefited from the remarkable leap forward in communication technology over the past few decades. Havana's repressive regime wishes to shift censorship's traditional fault lines to the electronic sphere, severely restricting its population's ability to chart its own destiny and violating its most basic human rights. The regime's strategy is to channel, filter, censor, and under-invest in modern technologies to preserve political dominance on the island.

Congress and the Obama Administration should explore and implement innovative and pro-active counter-strategies to promote online freedom that empower the Cuban people while circumventing the regime of informational dominance exercised by the Castro government.

Technology Increases Freedom.

Latin America represents 8 percent of the globe's total Internet usage, with 25 million daily users in Mexico alone. Nearly 82 percent of Internet users in Latin America regularly use online social networking platforms, and 78 percent have Facebook accounts. Across the region, activists such as Colombia's Oscar Morales, who rallied 12 million to oppose narco-terrorism, are employing new technologies to inform and conduct peaceful civic activism, strengthening the connecting fabric that supports democratic institutions and open governments.

This technological revolution has passed over Cuba. Havana continues to place its own interest in prolonging its permanence in power above the Cuban people's interests and the basic right to freedom of expression. Havana fears that if Cuba's people obtain unfettered access to information, its days will soon be numbered.

This is why the much-discussed underwater fiber optics cable linking Venezuela to Cuba has had no impact on increasing connectivity for Cuba's population. Similarly, when a U.S.-based company recently approached the Havana regime with an interest in expanding connectivity in Cuba, it was quickly turned away.

The hemisphere's sole totalitarian dictatorship presents a unique case of Orwellian control on all forms of information, embodied in Fidel's now-famous statement that "within the revolution everything; outside the revolution nothing." With the exception of a privileged few, those with Internet access in Cuba browse only a censored "intranet," which is heavily monitored—employing Chinese technology—by the government.

Efforts to circumvent state censorship are punished through Law 88 (the "Muzzle Law") and the "Law on Dangerousness," which criminalizes individuals who demonstrate "pre-criminal social dangerousness" (as defined by the state) even before committing an actual crime.

Cuba is among the world's worst Internet censors as described by international organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Inter-American Press Association, Reporters Without Borders, and Freedom House. This situation has motivated brave Cubans such as Guillermo Fariñas Hernandez to undertake hunger strikes and nearly sacrifice their lives in demand of Internet access. Cuba is also in the vanguard, along with Russia and China,

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working to use the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and United Nations to establish rules of governance for the Internet that facilitate censorship.

Islands of Freedom. Within Cuba's repressive sea of government-directed disinformation, the work of activists such as Fariñas offers glimmers of hope and points the way forward. Since 2007, blogger Yoani Sanchez has been narrating the reality of daily life in Cuba through her award-winning "Generacion Y" blog. Increasingly, Cuban dissidents are employing cell phones and text messages to exchange information among themselves and with their counterparts abroad. In a now-famous feat, earlier this month cell phones with video capability enabled the smuggling out of images exposing to the world the inhumane conditions within Cuba's notorious prisons.¹

What Should the U.S. Do? The Obama Administration should:

- Increase support to Cuba's opposition movement that seeks to break the Cuban government monopoly on information through the provision of easy-to-use technology—including smart phones and USB drives—expand text-messaging efforts, and explore the creation of a "cyberactivist defense fund"

to provide financial support to activists.

- Partner with technology firms and NGOs with expertise operating in Cuba to explore new ways to leverage technology to support citizen journalists, drawing on recent lessons learned from the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East.
- Explore new "super wi-fi" options to remotely broadcast free-access wireless Internet signals to densely populated centers in Cuba. New technological developments have enabled such long-range wireless signal broadcasting.
- Expand the Internet access provided by the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to a greater number of Cuban users and encourage U.S. allies to do the same.
- Support programs that generate greater international awareness of Internet censorship in Cuba as a means of generating additional support from private citizens and governments throughout the world.
- Oppose efforts to grant the U.N. a strong governance role over the Internet through the ITU or another U.N. body where nations

seeking to censor the medium can exert more influence than they currently can.

Power to the People. President Obama's demands for greater liberty for the Cuban people should be accompanied by a more robust plan of action. The Administration believes it is opening doors to democratic change with travelers and remittances to Cuba. It is hesitant to apply more direct pressure or speak out forcefully in order to breach the wall of prohibitions, censorship, and restricted access to the Internet that the aging Castro brothers believe necessary to win "the battle of ideas." In the long run, working to support the Cuban people's fight for unfettered access to the modern technologies of freedom will advance the cause of liberty and human dignity and the capacity of the people, not unelected leaders, to freely determine Cuba's future.

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1. See *El Nuevo Herald*, "Revelan desgarrador infierno en conocida cárcel cubana," (Uncovered heartbreaking hell in well-known Cuban prison), March 15, 2012, at <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/2012/03/14/1152488/videos-revelan-infierno-carceles.html> (March 20, 2012).