



## BLOGGING THE REVOLUTION

*The Cuban alternative blogosphere has become a movement that is impossible to ignore, even for the Castro regime.* **By José Simián**

**WHEN FIDEL CASTRO** overthrew Fulgencio Batista in 1959, he cemented the image of revolutionaries as bearded men with rifles, stomping into the presidential palace after a long and bloody journey through the jungle. Castro, the macho leader, fervently believed his revolution was eternal and never could have imagined that, some 50 years later, the most dangerous counterinsurgency would fight not with bullets, but

with blog posts—much less that its leader would be a woman.

“The Cuban blogosphere wears a skirt,” proudly proclaims the woman in question, Yoani Sánchez—a phrase that other bloggers repeat with joy.

Sánchez, 34, started writing out of disappointment with the Castro regime, which she describes as “a lie, a project to which my parents gave their best years, and for which I sacrificed myself.” Many Cubans agree that whether or not they support Castro, by living on the island, they’ve given themselves to his cause.

Sánchez found her outlet in 1994 when, with a group of friends, she assembled a computer out of parts obtained on the black market. “That was the beginning

of everything,” Sánchez remembers via phone from Havana.

But the birth of the Cuban alternative blogosphere as we know it didn’t happen until 10 years later, when Sánchez helped create the digital magazine *Consenso*, a space to reflect and debate: “What type of country do we want for ourselves and our children?” and “What do we need to do in order to achieve it?” *Consenso* later became the portal *Desde Cuba*, which hosts Sánchez’s blog, among others.

Described as her “personal exorcism,” Sánchez’s 3-year-old *Generación Y* blog at times receives as many as 5,000 comments per post, and the text she writes in Spanish is translated by vol-

unteers into 17 languages. Prestigious awards have come Sánchez's way (such as Spain's Premio Ortega y Gasset and Columbia University's Maria Moors Cabot Prize), making her an international celebrity.

Last fall, President Obama responded to a written questionnaire sent by Sánchez. "What we should all be able to agree on moving forward is the need to listen to the concerns of Cubans who live on the island," Obama wrote. "This is why everything you are doing to project your voice is so important."

Sánchez isn't alone. On an island lacking in Internet connections, dozens of citizens regularly find ways to post about issues, like the hardships they must overcome to get a loaf of bread or the recent death of patients at a Havana mental hospital due to starvation (the bloggers say their food was being sold on the black market by hospital employees).

Some of Sánchez's disciples include her husband, journalist Reinaldo Escobar, 62, and art historian Miriam Celaya, 50. Both of their blogs (*Desde Aquí* and *Sin Evasión*, respectively) are not very different from *Generación Y*: elegant reflections on the surreal experience of living in 21st century Cuba, a situation Celaya describes as "a gigan-



Yet all of the bloggers interviewed for this article reject the idea that what they do is "political," a word normally reserved for those who belong to a party or share a definitive ideology.

"We don't adopt agreements or common decisions," Escobar says. "We are a fistful of free electrons that have merged in a common learning experience."

That learning experience is the *Academia Blogger*, a biweekly class at the Escobar-Sánchez household launched in October of last year and regularly attended by some 30 bloggers. The sessions include Web programming, film, photography, Cuban

6, 2009. While on their way to a march for nonviolence, Sánchez, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo (a 28-year-old photographer, fiction writer and blogger of *Lunes de Post-Revolución*) and Claudia Cadelo (26, blogger of *Octavo Cerco*) were kidnapped and beaten by agents.

In addition, Sánchez admits to having lost friends, and there has been some public opposition (though it is unclear if it is authentic or staged by the government). Still, none of these factors have scared off the bloggers. If anything, their citizen journalism has gained momentum—the organized efforts to gain access to the Web through places like embassies and hotels, where they pay steep connection prices; the burning of their blogs onto CDs so other Cubans can read the censored content from home; the dictating of posts over the phone to friends abroad.

"The Cuban government's main problem is that they don't understand that these new phenomena can't be fought with the old weapons of repression," Sánchez said after the attack. "I don't think they are afraid of me, because I'm just a little person they can easily eliminate. What they are afraid of is that more and more people are projecting their voices. This is why they may be attempting to apply some sort of vaccine, so the blogger virus, the virus of opinions, does not spread."

But it has already spread. And this is one virus that just might mutate into something far deadlier for the status quo: the end of an era. □

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tic shipwreck." Indeed, in a recent post she recounts how the authorities of a Havana junior high school told parents to not encourage their kids to pursue college studies. What the country needed instead of professionals, they argued, were "builders, farm workers, welders and lathe operators."

"What happened in that school, plus the deaths at the psychiatric hospital, show how deep a crisis Cuba is in," Celaya says. "Education and health care used to be the pride of the Cuban system and now are in complete collapse."

culture, anthropology, philosophy and jurisprudence.

Although the classes occur with the knowledge of the Cuban government, the authorities are not indifferent to the bloggers. Their blogs are blocked within the island; Sánchez has posted pictures of the plainclothes agents that regularly sit in front of her house; and all of the bloggers interviewed for this article took for granted that our telephone conversations were being recorded.

The most notorious incident of government harassment took place on Nov.