INTERNET AND SOCIETY IN CUBA

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When looking at the potential of the Internet in Cuba, it is useful to take a comparative perspective. The Internet challenges the control of governments all over the world, and not just in authoritarian countries. Western democracies talk about Internet freedom, yet leaders will sing a different tune if it looks like the use of social media poses a threat to national security and stability.

However, I would argue that the Internet poses even greater challenges to authoritarian countries, namely by advancing freedom of information, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

1. **Freedom of Information:** Authoritarian governments like to tell their side of the story. If they do not like a historical event, they can "try to" airbrush it. If the government makes a mistake, they can "try to" erase it from the record. In the Internet age, it is much harder to suppress information.

2. **Freedom of Speech:** In authoritarian countries, you have to be careful what you say. If you do not like the government or if you do not agree with the state's interpretation of history, you basically keep it to yourself. The state media offers no place for dissenting views. Now, even in the most repressive countries, there are bloggers and tweeters saying all kinds of things that do not agree with the party line.

3. **Freedom of Assembly:** Authoritarian governments try to isolate their critics from one another. The Internet helps people know that they are not alone. They can find hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of people who share their views.

What does this all mean for Cuba? The Internet has not yet been a major threat to Cuban government control because access is so restricted and expensive. Even so, the Internet does offer some Cubans greater opportunities to express themselves as well as to receive new information. In the Cuban case, one of the most striking effects of the Internet is not its ability to spread information around the island, but rather the way it helps build networks between Cuba and the rest of the world. This creates a kind of protection: it is pretty hard to make a well-known blogger or dissident disappear. And the Internet has facilitated the rise of individuals like Yoani Sánchez, who has become a kind of diplomat, dissident spokesperson and interlocutor with politicians from around the world.

Now, Cuba faces a dilemma. The government has demonstrated its interest in economic reforms, but it is hard to make major economic or technological strides if only a tiny percentage of the population has access to the Internet. Cuba's small, recent steps toward increasing Internet access on the island shows some recognition of that fact. I would imagine that this trend will only continue. Cuba does not want to be North Korea, which is completely shut off from the world. At the same time it is very hard to imagine that Cuba's leaders would allow free, unfettered Internet access. Most likely Cuba will look for lessons from China, which offers the Internet to its citizens but at the same time tries to maintain strict control over what is being written and read online.