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Digital media and the empowerment of Cuban musicians in tumultuous times: *¿Un nuevo amanecer?*

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Abstract:

Digital technology has profoundly reconfigured state-society relations and Cuba's recent broadening of internet access makes for a fascinating case in this regard. However, what this means for the country's music sector is poorly researched. We explore the role digital media plays in the empowerment of Cuban musicians. While digital media allows musicians to work more independently from government institutions, the ability to benefit from the opportunity depends on unequally distributed resources. Nonetheless, the government's broadening of internet access goes hand in hand with increasing control over musicians' autonomy and expression, leading to a cycle of protest and repression. Digital media provides a highly self-reinforcing tool for collective action. *Keywords*: Digital media, technology, music, empowerment, Cuba.

Resumen: Medios digitales y el empoderamiento de los músicos cubanos en tiempos tumultuosos: ¿Un nuevo amanecer?

La tecnología digital ha cambiado profundamente las relaciones entre estado y sociedad, como lo muestra el caso de Cuba, donde el acceso a internet se ha extendido recientemente. Sin embargo, existen pocos estudios que demuestren qué significan estos desarrollos para el sector musical en Cuba. En este artículo exploramos el papel que juegan los medios digitales en el empoderamiento de los músicos cubanos. Los medios digitales ayudan a los músicos a trabajar más independientemente de las instituciones gubernamentales. Sin embargo, las posibilidades de beneficiarse de estas oportunidades no están distribuidas de manera equitativa. La ampliación del acceso a internet por parte del gobierno va de la mano con el control sobre la expresión musical, causando un ciclo de protestas y represión. Los medios digitales ofrecen una herramienta autorreforzante para la acción colectiva. *Palabras clave*: Medios digitales, tecnología, música, empoderamiento, Cuba.

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Introduction

Digital technology has profoundly reconfigured state-society relations throughout Latin America and the world (Álvarez et al., 2015; Costa & Rodríguez, 2018; Lojo, 2018), and Cuba's paradoxical adoption of digital technology stands out as a fascinating case (Henken & García Santamaría, 2021; Venegas, 2010). Recently, access to and use of digital technologies in Cuba – particularly mobile technology – has undergone rapid transformation (Álvarez et al., 2017; Geoffray, 2015; Grandinetti & Eszenyi, 2018). Since 2011, the state has opened up internet access for a wider range of ordinary Cubans, while simultaneously strengthening its control over the sector and over digital media. This way, the government makes an attempt to tap into the benefits that the internet provides for the development of the country, while cautiously trying to mitigate the potential destabilising effects it could have on the political sphere (Henken, 2021; Venegas, 2010). Although internet access is far from optimal, the popularity of digital media and technology is rapidly advancing on the island. Indeed, Henken argues that technology is radically reconfiguring the evolution of the cultural, economic, and political project that is the Cuban Revolution in myriad unprecedented ways (2021, p. 2). The continuing reconfiguration of state-citizen relations through digital technology, in tandem with the restructuring of the Cuban economy, raises many urgent questions. Research sheds light on these questions for example in the fields of tourism (Ogden, 2021; Venegas, 2010), film (Venegas, 2010), transnational engagements and mobilisation (Geoffray, 2015; Venegas, 2010). However, little is known about the impacts of the digital revolution [1] on Cuba's music industry, a sector of particular symbolic and cultural importance.

The internet started to open up to the public at the same time the country started moving steadily towards a more decentralised economic model, allowing for entrepreneurship in many sectors. However, the music sector, and the cultural sector more generally, has not been included in these changes. Rather, these sectors experience heightened state control and monitoring. The stark contrast between the limited freedoms of the music sector and other sectors in Cuba has led to discontent amongst independent artists. While international digital media offers a virtual public space beyond the direct control of the state, and thereby potentially enables Cuban musicians to work independently from government institutions, recent decrees on artistic and critical expression introduced in 2018 clearly show the intentions of tightened state control. Ever since, government repression of musicians has intensified, but so have collective action and protests by musicians.

In this article we critically examine the role of digital media [2] in the empowerment of Cuban musicians, especially with regard to musicians working outside of the framework of the Cuban state. Internationally, debates often expound on the disruptive effects of digital technologies and media on the power structures of the music industry (Archila, 2016; Lamacchia, 2012, 2017; Mil-

lar, 2009; Puerta, 2017;. Tschmuck, 2016). Interestingly, this relation generally assumes the context of a capitalist system and has been explored to a very limited extent in countries with a high degree of state control. In many capitalist economies, we see that the openness, accessibility and democratisation of the digital revolution in music run in parallel with increased inequalities, reduced incomes and new power imbalances (Lamacchia, 2017; Negus, 2019; Puerta, 2017). In Cuba, these contradictions are also present but take a different form. So far, we know very little about the exact implications and particularly what they mean for musicians to lead the lives they value (Sen, 1999). This is becoming all the more urgent given the recent twin developments of increased internet access and enhanced state control through regulatory changes aimed at restricting artistic expression.

This article is based on an ethnographic study that spanned 14 months, from February 2020 to April 2021. The study combines offline and virtual 'netnography', as to capture the co-determining between society and individuals on the one hand, and technologies on the other hand.[3] On-site research in Havana was conducted by the first author (February-March 2020). This included day-to-day interactions, observation and informal conversations with Cuban musicians, and attendance at events. Fieldwork continued online from April 2020 to April 2021. Observation was done on social media by following various Cuban musicians on Facebook and Instagram, and by following Cuban Facebook groups focused on the Cuban music sector, including videos, vlogs, posts and discussions. Additionally, digital media use by musicians was observed mainly on YouTube and Spotify, the most intensively used channels.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online with thirteen Cuban musicians and Cuban music experts (April-May 2020), who were recruited through snowball sampling, on-site fieldwork, networking via social media and through a selection of contemporary and 'progressive' Cuban musicians suggested by Spotify's algorithm. Means of communication included video calls and conversations through texting and voice memos. In December 2020 we conducted additional online interviews with ten participants through the same channels, after unrest in Cuba abruptly escalated following a protest (including many musicians) on 27 November 2020. We therefore considered these interviews a unique opportunity to research unfolding collective action by musicians.

All research activities focused on Cuban musicians living in Cuba as well as Cuban musicians who migrated to Europe and Canada.[4] While we focused on independent musicians, the majority of the participants also work, or have worked, under a government agency contract. More specifically, from the interviews with Cuban musicians that were conducted in April 2020, five of the participants worked exclusively under a government agency contract, two have worked solely on an independent basis, and four of the participants worked completely independent from the government. Participants range from famous to less well-known musicians[5] and are very diverse in terms of gender, age,

music style [6], and racial identification. During the interviews in December 2020, five of the participants were independent journalists, of which three were members of the San Isidro Movement and also present at the protest on the 27 of November. Three interviews were follow up interviews, and two interviews were with Cuban migrants that are highly involved in current Cuban affairs because of ties with family and friends on the island. Given the sensitive nature of the research and the risk this could imply for participants, sometimes limited information is provided about the participant on an individual basis, or a synonym is used. All ethnographic and interview data were analysed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Finally, policy documents, including the Cuban constitution of 2019, Decrees 370 and 349, and a white paper analysing Decree 349, were analysed.

In the remainder of this article, the first two sections present the theoretical conceptualisation: we first outline the relation between music, power and empowerment, and second, we discuss the impacts of digitalisation on empowerment and democratisation. We subsequently present our analysis in three sections by first delving into the three broad categories and strategies of Cuban musicians. We then explore how digital media reconfigures these options through changing access to resources and existential empowerment. Next, we demonstrate how digital media is also used for collective action, and how this has potential to lead to institutional empowerment. Finally, we discuss these outcomes in light of the broader debates.

Music, power and empowerment

Music is often used strategically by the state as a propaganda tool or to wield soft power (Celnik et al., 2019). This strong link between state power, ideology and music is also evident in Cuba's state policy, which strongly supports music as a source of national pride and identity (Álvarez et al., 2017), while being cautious so that music does not become a powerful means of government critique. Indeed, states recognise that music has the power to promote group ideologies and identities, and to delineate the lines of inclusion or exclusion of social groups (Brown & Volgsten, 2010). However, music can also create or reinforce conflict and provide citizens with a powerful means to express discontentment with governments (Brown & Volgsten, 2010; Lazcano, 2016). The Cuban underground rap scene of the 1990s, which resisted the revolutionary Cuban ideals in their lyrics, can be seen as a social movement's quest for power and emancipation with respect to the Cuban government. A particularly important and unexplored topic is how digital technology and media alters opportunities and barriers for musicians in relation to one another, the music industry, and the state. In that configuration, we focus on empowerment as a central concept. Sen describes empowerment as a process that liberates people from external constraints in the way of pursuing their own and mutually shared values (Sen, 1999). However, his conceptualisation places limited attention on

institutions and state-citizen relations, and little consideration for negative freedoms. Therefore, we add parts of Welzel's (2014) theory of human empowerment, which pays more attention to structure-agency interactions, institutional power, and emancipative values. [7]

Welzel differentiates between existential empowerment, institutional empowerment and psychological empowerment; here we use the first two types. [8] The first, existential empowerment, is related to an increase in resources. Existential constraints recede when an individual gains access to and control over intellectual (knowledge, skills and information), connective (networks of exchange) and material (equipment, tools and income) resources. Welzel mentions that large-scale technological advancement increases all three resource types. In this sense, increased internet access might lead to online platforms offering new tools for promotion or increased opportunities to connect with a broader network, which could additionally provide a source of information to its users. Institutional empowerment, as we adapt it from Welzel's theory, can be seen as the possibility to change institutions and larger political-economic power structures through collective action. Welzel argues that widespread action resources [9] contribute to collective action, and digital media is a good example of a widespread resource. Collective action can be self-reinforcing: when successful, it provides a common sense of satisfaction and solidarity. However, it may also lead to increased oppression, for example through a power struggle between citizens and the state. Furthermore, for empowerment and collective action to happen, people should also be able to envision potential alternatives from their current reality; they need to be sensitive to social injustice in order to be able to oppose it. Welzel captures this as emancipative values while Appadurai refers to it as the capacity to aspire: a certain 'navigational' capacity towards change (Appadurai, 2004).

Digital revolution in the music industry: A tool for empowerment?

Whether the digital revolution leads to democratisation and empowerment is a debate that has attracted the interest of many scholars. The profound reconfigurations of state-citizen relations engendered by digital technology and media (Costa & Rodríguez, 2018; Lojo, 2018; Scullion et al., 2013) are interpreted in different ways. On one hand, deriving from a technological modernisation paradigm, the 'cyber-optimists' argue that digital media leads to democratisation in the economic and social spheres (Shirky, 2008; Rheingold, 2008). For instance, digital media offers a virtual public space where people are able to critically express themselves as well as share and access information efficiently. Shirky argues that digital media provides the tools for group organisation whereby existing institutions (businesses, schools and governments) lose their relative advantage. The inherent promise is that new types of social 'movements' or groups can counter market and bureaucratic power and serve as a

vehicle of social change and community empowerment (Acquier et al., 2017), hence leading to democratisation 'from below'.

However, this traditional optimism is increasingly being challenged. The 'cyber-sceptics' argue that digital technology cannot circumvent, but is rather embedded in and shaped by, structures that are already in place (Gerbaudo, 2021; Morozov, 2012). With regard to social media, for example, Schor et al. (2017) argue that in community-based platforms, social interaction reproduces the wider institutional ideas about class, race and gender. However, current trends in digital technology – including the dominance of algorithms and big data – also generate new differences, inequalities, higher levels of interaction, and therefore call for new, more subtle and sophisticated types of social control (Costa & Rodríguez, 2018). More generally, the powerful monopoly of 'Big Tech' companies controlling and gatekeeping the newly created public sphere of social media (Tufekci, 2017), warrants caution. Another question posed by sceptics is: In whose interest is online information monitored and controlled? Morozov (2012) notes that authoritarian governments are able to use the internet for surveillance and use very sophisticated systems of internet dictatorship.

Moving beyond optimism *vs*. scepticism, more nuanced perspectives on the role of digital technology and media in social change are provided, e.g. by research in authoritarian contexts. Tufekci outlines how the relations between digital technology and society are multi-layered: social dynamics are intermixed with technological materiality in ways that defy simple cause-effect relations or determinism, and depending on the affordances of each particular technology as well as on the actions and agency of people (Tufekci, 2017). Indeed, digital technology is based on a set of social and technological relations amongst government, institutions and individuals that affect the way we inhabit the world, and its effects should be viewed in that light (Costa & Rodríguez, 2018; Lojo, 2018; Venegas, 2010). Digital tools such as social media can empower social movements, as they can help rapidly amass large groups of people for a common goal, and enhance their visibility (Tufekci, 2017). Social media and cell phones with cameras also allow protesters to broadcast protests to the wider world, which makes the cost of repression higher. The "digital networked public sphere" makes it possible to discover collective preferences, ideas and common ground (making people less compliant); it powerfully reshapes possibilities by blurring the boundaries between public and private, home and street, individual and collective action (Tufekci, 2017). Digital media and connectivity in the context of protest and rebellion also creates a clear sense of community and belonging across diverse groups of people. However, in the long term, such digitally-enhanced collective action often struggles with collective decision making and leadership creation (Tufekci, 2017).

Tufekci (2017) also acknowledges that digital technology is appropriated by authoritarian states for further repression (which tends not to deter protesters), yet notes how states and their allies also use it in much more subtle ways

to influence the online public sphere with armies of trolls, propaganda, misinformation, demonization etc., thereby spreading confusion to paralyze people into inaction (see Henken, 2021). In the case of Cuba, the state has dealt with digital technology in paradoxical ways, both centralising and controlling yet also enhancing knowledge and technological literacy (Henken, 2021; Venegas, 2010). Meanwhile, research has also highlighted the creative and inventive ways in which people get around barriers or blockades to digital technology (Venegas, 2010).

Delving more deeply into the case of Cuba, Henken argues that “the unprecedented increase in access to alternative forms of information from abroad combined with the growing ability of Cuban citizens to communicate horizontally among themselves, producing and sharing their own diverse reportage, experiences, and points of view independently of the government has enormous if as of yet unclear implications for Cuban political life, civil society, and in a variety of public spheres.” (2021, p. 5). In the past few years, Cuba has experienced non-stop sociopolitical mobilizations enabled by social media, which has eroded activists’ fear of speaking out and isolation, enabled new and larger types of demonstrations to be organized and broadcasted, and decreased the government’s traditional control over Cuba’s narrative (Henken, 2021). Indeed, whereas it is important to note the difference between having access to digital media and being heard (see Tufekci, 2017), in Cuba such increased access and enhanced online activism has clearly translated into large-scale offline action as well.

Of all industries, the music industry might be amongst the most disrupted by the digital revolution since the arrival of digital platforms which provide new opportunities for music distribution, promotion and commercialization (Archila, 2016; Puerta, 2017). Developments within the music industry are often referred to as the ‘digital revolution’ and disruptive innovation (Millar, 2009; Tschmuck, 2016). Many scholars argue that the emergence of digital platforms has led to the democratisation of the sector in favour of the independent musician and in detriment of the traditionally dominant large record companies (Frost, 2007; Kasaras, 2002; Tschmuck, 2016). Artists can now promote and distribute their music and earn royalties through the internet without being dependent on a record label, while also having better access to new international markets (Puerta, 2017). Today’s music industry is characterised by high connectivity, little control and increased amateur creativity (Wikstrom, 2009). Whereas the old music industry was an industry of physical goods, the current music industry is characterised by *services*. As a result of the reduced significance of physical music distribution and mass media, control over information streams by music firms has declined. Digital media allows anyone to upload content which leads to increased connectivity but less control. Finally, the tools that are offered by social media, distribution and commercialization platforms – in tandem with the availability of production software – enable non-professional artists to create music and publish it online. Home studios

have become affordable for many, and distribution sites such as Finetunes, CDBaby and Rebeat enable musicians to upload and distribute music to streaming platforms such as iTunes, Spotify and Deezer.

However, some scholars are more pessimistic about the position of musicians and the democratisation of the music industry (Marshall, 2015; Morrow & Fangjun, 2016; Negus, 2019). Adequate economic reward and compensation for musicians is often lacking, particularly when it comes to recordings (Lamacchia, 2017; Marshall, 2015; Puerta, 2017); a large number of streams are necessary to earn a decent income from streaming royalties (Wikstrom, 2009). This is particularly a problem for young, independent and unestablished artists, especially from countries at the peripheries of global music industries, where there are hardly any aggregators or distributors present. Lamacchia (2017) notes that for independent musicians in Argentina, digital media is mostly a way to achieve more visibility and fame, and to communicate directly with each other and their audience; rather than a way to earn a direct income. Furthermore, Morrow and Fangjun (2016) argue that the hierarchical structures of major labels at the top of the pyramid might be less adjusted than some argue; major labels, often taking a reactive approach by observing which independent artists show signs of potential success, sign these musicians to further build their careers. Hence power remains contingent upon existing structures that determine access to capital, financing, and market support.

Cuban musicians: Between state, migration and independence

Music is a key element of Cuban identity and for many, a source of pride. Cuban music has benefited from an extensive state support system since the 1960s (Barsó, 2018); the other side of this coin is high state control. This has resulted in three broad categories of – and strategies for – Cuban musicians, namely: 1) musicians that have a license from a government music agency; 2) independent musicians; and 3) Cubans that have migrated. It is important to understand what these positions entail, as they show how Cuban musicians navigate structural conditions and how digital media and new regulations play into that. First, musicians licensed by the government can be formally hired. As the Cuban state music sector is currently unable to absorb the large number of professional musicians, only a small proportion of graduated musicians is able to obtain a license, after an audition process (though arguably social networks also play a role) (Barsó, 2018). Who will be able to obtain registration, and thus be legally allowed to create art, is decided by inspectors from the Ministerio de Cultura (MINCULT) and Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) (Diversent, García, Matei & Trébault, 2019). A license from an agency in Cuba gives musicians the legal right to hold and earn money from concerts. In practice, however, holding a license does not necessarily imply that one is actually actively supported by the agency (Interview Bárbaro, 2020); often all activities such as management and promotion are still done by the musician itself.

The second category of musicians are those who work independently from the state. Interviewed participants indicate that the majority of Cuban musicians work independently from government agencies. William, a hobby musician living in Havana, explained:

> An independent artist is a person that does not count on the support of governmental organisations, one that does not have an enterprise, nor a label. Everything is produced in an independent way, in home studios, where you do the promotion yourself and look for work and places where you can present yourself. It is pretty difficult for us in Cuba.

Working independently is often the only option for Cuban musicians given the difficulties of obtaining a license, but artists also choose this option because they use their music as a means for political expression and activism. The institutionalisation of the Cuban music sector goes hand in hand with censorship and limits to the freedom of expression; agencies do not support musicians that express dissenting ideas in their music. In addition, government agencies tend to support conservative or mainstream music styles (e.g., traditional styles such as salsa, trova, mambo, changui, rumba, chachacha, and son and danzon; but more recently also genres such as rock and hip hop, though in selective ways), while more progressive ideas and contemporary Afro-Cuban styles such as reggaeton and reparto are more ignored or discriminated against (Levine, 2021; Interview Joao Del Monte, 2020). Some musicians deliberately choose to work as far away as possible from music agencies so they are able to pursue their own personal and progressive ideas, allowing them more freedom of creative expression.

While many research participants highlighted the difficulty of working independently, success very much depends on one's position in society and one's social connections. Although working independently bears great risks, there are financial benefits. The Cuban producer and DJ Humberto, [10] who performs in a wide range of venues, explained that he often entered into direct agreements without informing government institutions. Due to the bureaucratic system, agency payments can take months, and sometimes musicians are not paid at all. Furthermore, state agencies levy taxes of 30 per cent on performances (Fernández, 2021). All this makes it very attractive for Cuban musicians to take the risky option of a direct venue agreement.

Finally, there is the migrated musician. Almost all interviewed musicians indicated high aspirations to migrate, as to be able to build a career abroad. Migration is mostly used as a way to organise a network and fanbase abroad, while continuing to be able to enter Cuba and have parts of their life established on the island. Many successful Cuban musicians have followed this strategy including Gente de Zona, Los Oldeanos, Alain Perez, Telmary, and Orishas. Their success abroad enabled them to continue to work independently from Cuban government agencies. However, it is doubtful whether this would work for less famous musicians.

Reconfiguring options: Access to resources and existential empowerment

Cuba only officially connected to the internet in 1996 as a result of the tensions between Cuba and the United States, a lack of infrastructure in the country, and the ideals from the Cuban Revolution that only allow for limited freedoms (Grandinetti & Eszenyi, 2018; Press, 2021; Venegas, 2010). The decision was made to restrict access only to government-tied institutions such as universities and ministries (Herrera & Cañive, 2021). This way the government tried to gain development benefits that the internet could provide, while minimising potential destabilising effects, as well as preventing any "empowerment organisation" that the United States would undertake through the internet in Cuba (Herrera & Cañive, 2021). Nonetheless, in 2011, the government opened up access to the wider public. Whereas internet connection started only with Wi-Fi hotspots and internet cafes, in 2018 3G internet was introduced which significantly broadened digital options for Cubans. Still, the internet remains very slow and expensive, especially considering the average income earned in Cuba. Also, the internet is provided only by the state owned company called ETECSA, so that the government has all control over internet services. Furthermore, various international digital media such as Instagram, Soundcloud, Snapchat and Spotify are blocked in the country. However, many Cubans make use of a VPN, which can simply be bought on the internet and enables you to change your IP address to one outside of Cuba. This gives Cubans the possibility to circumvent blockades and use the internet as if they were outside of Cuba. The internet penetration rate has risen rapidly from 16 per cent in 2011 to 62 per cent in 2019, and keeps developing at a fast pace (The World Bank, 2021). All interviewed participants, from hobby to professional musicians, use digital platforms such as Deezer, Spotify and YouTube for distributing and promoting their music. Sergio, who is currently living in Havana and active as an independent reggaeton musician stated the following:

> The media in Cuba are used more than before, because people are using more YouTube, more Spotify, and Instagram more intensely. The people are connecting a lot. This is really important, before only national media and communication were in use. Right here right now, the people are looking for international platforms, and this way I think the internet is gaining ground a lot, really strong here.

While the platforms are used widely, not all musicians can benefit equally and success is not at all guaranteed. This depends on their different empowerment resources, which are changing to some extent as a result of digitalisation. First of all, Cuba's general poverty and scarcity of resources – also in the context of historical crises and embargos – have clear ramifications for musicians' access to resources. According to Alfredo, a young Afro-Cuban living in Havana, who is both active as a professional musician in a band as an independent hip hop artist, 'you have to choose between eating or saving money to buy accessories

for a studio' (Alfredo interview, 2020). Musicians face obstacles in terms of very basic necessities such as paying for transportation or instruments. Access to resources is differentiated across the intersections of class, race, gender and other axes of inequality. There is a clear intersectionality of class and race, and deeply rooted social and institutional racism impacts the socioeconomic opportunities of the Afro-Cuban population (Pietro & Ruiz, 2010). These issues come to bear on the music sector too, for example through disadvantages in access to music education. Magdelys, who migrated to Canada and is a musician and founder from the successful Afro-Latin band OKAN explained, 'I was the only black girl in my class, it was a rich kid school'. She lived in a poor neighbourhood very far from the music school:

> It is on the other side of the city. We had to get there, we had no car, we had to take several [types of] transportation to get there. It was a nightmare for a seven-year-old. I got lost. It was really hard. I got in, but now that I am an adult and I think back about my mom taking that decision, and everything that it entitles when you get into this school...because your kids have like special needs, instruments, clothing for certain activities, because everyone is rich. The kids at these schools, are the kids from the famous artists.

Magdelys' explanation also shows that such unequal distribution of economic and educational resources relates to social networks. While Cuba's high social cohesion and high regard for music are supportive resources for most musicians, the specific social networks related to well-connected people in the industry, and to emigrated Cubans and their remittances, are unequally distributed.

In which ways does digital media influence such access to resources? It is important to note that new technologies do not enter in a vacuum: since the 1990s the landscape for independent musicians in Cuba has evolved, as musicians have gained increased access to recording, production and distribution technologies, and smaller and independent producers and studios started to come up (Levine, 2021). Independent musicians gained more possibilities and importance (Perry, 2018), yet were never free from state censorship or control. Pre-existing face-to-face media distribution networks and infrastructures, such as *el paquete*, also greatly influenced these developments: to some extent such networks allowed musicians more freedom to have their music distributed and promoted outside official channels, which has been particularly important for more contested and non-state-sponsored genres such as reggaeton (Levine, 2021).

The recent digital revolution has deepened these emerging possibilities for independent musicians, leading to an increase in (semi)independent artistic projects (Fernández, 2016). Simultaneously, the state efforts to control these independent initiatives are intensifying as well. First, enhanced social connectivity, promotion and visibility is a clear advantage for many musicians. Digital social media serves as effective word-of-mouth promotion whereby friends

support each other by sharing content through for example WhatsApp or Facebook. Many people do not have the financial means to buy a phone or internet data, but fieldwork observation revealed that digital information is more widely shared through strong, in-place communication networks. Previously existing distribution networks such as those related to *el paquete* are still important, yet most of the respondents in our research argued that these networks would not risk the inclusion of more critical expression in their *paquete* and would apply self-censorship. In that sense it could be argued that digital media enables a further expansion of opportunities beyond the *paquetes*.

Digital media also offers the potential to earn money through streaming royalties on distribution and commercialization platforms such as Spotify and Deezer. This is a particularly interesting option for independent musicians which potentially broadens their opportunities. Research participants living in Cuba have placed their music on international streaming platforms. But although musicians are increasingly aware of this possibility, commercialising music on an independent basis is legally prohibited in Cuba. As a result there seems to be little knowledge about – or confidence in – the commercial potential. Therefore, Cuba's independent musicians use streaming platforms mostly for visibility purposes. Furthermore, a practical obstacle to earning an income from streaming platforms is that Cubans are unable to open up a commercial bank account (except for those with overseas connections). Another important limitation is the visibility paradox. In order to earn a decent income from streaming royalties, one needs a great number of streams, which is only possible with high visibility and fame. However, since it is illegal in Cuba to work independently from the government, visibility can have two effects: 1) It can cause punitive repercussions by the government when the lyrics are very critical and the musician is considered a dissident; and 2) A state music agency will try to encapsulate the musician and provide them a contract. For some musicians this is not desirable, as it can lead to a loss of income (e.g., through high tax payments). Daymé, a successful Afro-Cuban jazz musician, migrated to Canada five years ago and has contracts with several music companies. She explains how the Cuban government took notice of her fame which started after she migrated to Canada. Since she still has Cuban nationality, she needed to sign a contract with a Cuban music agency and pay taxes over her income. She stated:

> But what happened is, in Cuba they discovered that I was well-known in the world. That I was touring around the world, that I was earning money around the world…so they called me, and they arranged a meeting, a closed-door meeting, and they told me that I could not do that, because I was not doing anything through the Cuban government. And also, I told them at that time, I don't have a contract with you. [...] and they just picked up the phone and they called the main, like the Minister of Culture, do you

> know that Daymé does not have a contract here, in Cuba? We have to fix that. And they made a contract right away.

On the other hand, other musicians aim to achieve independent success through fame and visibility through digital media with the ultimate goal of raising the interest of a government agency.

The independent option is thus becoming more and more achievable for musicians, thanks to digital media providing wider visibility, distribution and – to a limited extent – commercialization. However, this does not work equally well for all musicians, and success is not at all guaranteed. Naturally, the structural problems of poverty, institutional racism and unequal distribution of resources cannot be solved by digital media alone. What social media and – to a more limited extent – new distribution/commercialization platforms can do is to allow musicians more freedom to express themselves and build a reputation, but this can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, such freedom has clearly increased: while the Cuban government controls national media, they are not capable of censoring anything directly on international digital platforms (interview Bárbaro, 2020). This gives musicians the opportunity to upload music without any limitations in terms of online censorship. Bárbaro, who migrated to Europe five years ago, is a successful hip hop artist who was active both in the 1990s hip hop movement but also worked under an agency contract in Cuba. He states that social media offers a space that cannot be controlled by the Cuban government:

> It has changed because social media is a powerful tool, and they cannot control that. That is bigger than them. But otherwise, everything is the same. Because they have control, the only thing that can escape from their hand is social media. It is something they really can not control. But inside of that everything is the same, maybe even worse.

Indeed, broadening options and freedoms at the same time led to a backlash of more government control which further constrains these options, as we illustrate in the next section.

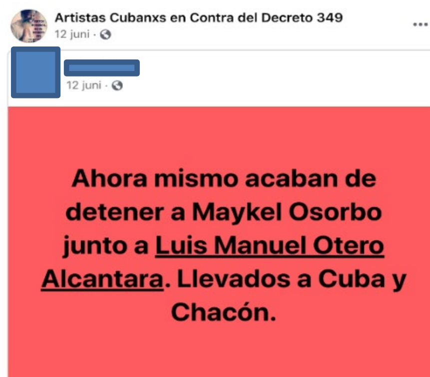
Digital media and institutional empowerment: visibility and repression

Cuba's community of musicians, and artists more generally, are clearly making use of digital opportunities not only for their personal achievement but also for collective action. Social media in particular offers an effective virtual space for collective action and critical public debate, which could function as an accountability mechanism for the Cuban government. Relations with the government are becoming increasingly strained as a result. The blogosphere, which was largely initiated by the Cuban Yoani Sánchez in 2007, served as the foundation for virtual online spaces that facilitate critical debate. In 2007, she launched her own blog, *Generación Y*, which was later transformed into the

more professional website *14ymedio* (Henken, 2021b). However, as a result of improved digital opportunities, the chances of critical messages reaching an audience and activating them have significantly increased. As a result, the government has recently implemented regulatory changes. In particular, Decree 349 and Decree 370 increase formal state control over the cultural sector and the virtual space that digital media offers. Decree 349 criminalises independent art and formalises government intervention in independent artistic activities. Decree 370, which also targets independent journalists, illegalises any dissenting expression on social media not in line with Cuban nationalist ideas. It is probable that these regulatory changes have been introduced to counteract the rapidly changing digital space as well as the increase in foreign influence due to looser migration policies and perceived to be a threat to the Revolution (Diversent, García, Matei & Trébault, 2019). During the interviews in April 2020 and November 2020, none of the participants had heard about any specific cases in which independent musicians faced repercussions based on Decree 349. Instead, it is argued that the Decree was introduced by the government as a form of psychological repression.

Since about 2018, and particularly since 2020, the repression of musicians by the government on one hand, and collective action and protests by musicians (and the cultural sector at large) on the other, have intensified and reinforced each other. Social media has played an important role in these forms of collective action. One could argue that Decree 349 and Decree 370 not only formalised already existing repression of artists, it simultaneously gave Cuban activists something tacit as a base for collective action.

Figure 1. Maykel Osorbo and Luis Manuel Otero Alcantaro were taken to the intersecting streets in Havana where the Police Department is situated



Source: Facebook group 'Artistas Cubanxs en Contra del Decreto 349

Since 2018 various critical Facebook pages, where artists express discontent with Decree 370 and Decree 349 (and human rights violations more generally), have been created and are gaining in popularity.[11] Examples of these pages include: Artistas Cubanxs Contra del Decreto 349 (Cuban Artists Against De-

cree 349); Unión Patriótica de Cuba #unpacu (Patriotic Union of Cuba); and Movimiento San Isidro (San Isidro Movement, MSI). Such social media accounts function as an accountability mechanism as they increase knowledge about the government's actions, for example by quickly spreading news about arrests and abductions (see Figure 1).

Social media are also proving useful for offline collective action in which music and musicians play an important role. On 27 November 2020, people flocked to the streets to demand a dialogue with the government about freedom of expression and human rights in general. The protest was sparked by the arrest of rapper and member of MSI Denis Solis. He shared a video on social media in which he was arrested for insulting a police officer who had entered his home and harassed him (Vázquez, 2020). He was then imprisoned without a fair trial. In response to his detention, the MSI began a hunger strike, which resulted in the arrest of some of the activists. For these reasons, a group of 30 artists and intellectuals decided to go to the Ministry of Culture, to not only demand the release of Denis Solis and the other members of MSI, but more importantly to appeal for a dialogue between Cuban citizens and the government, on 'freedom of expression, the right to have rights, to stop repression and censoring artists and Cubans in general' (Interview Camilla, 2020). While the protest began with only 30 people, it quickly grew to include a spontaneous influx of people who supported the demands being made. Rafa, one of the editors of the AM:PM magazine, who attended the demonstration himself, explained that

> The gesture of the demonstration caught the government off guard. It is used to deal with binary attitudes: either in favour of the government or against it. Up to that moment, what had happened in San Isidro could be put into that logic.

The large number and diversity of the group, the presence of international press and the explicit support of a number of relevant national culture figures transcended this usual binary, and pressured the Ministry of Culture that day to agree on meeting the appeal for a dialogue between the institution and a group of representatives of the protestors. However, only a few hours after the demonstration, the Ministry of Culture began to deny the demands made, as well as launch a campaign to discredit the protestors and delegitimize their reasons for protesting. Camilla, an independent journalist who attended the demonstration and was also part of the group that represented the protestors in front of the Ministry of Culture, described the aftermath of the demonstration:

> Since the 27 of November, there has been more military than ever, all over Havana. The army is in the streets with large weapons. I have never seen this. They evidently are afraid of change. All of these protests have been repressed, the people detained and immediately threatened. Also, the people that protested on the 27 of November, fundamentally 30 artists and intellec-

> tuals who represent the dialogue with the Vice Minister of Culture, have been threatened or cited for compromising the Security of the State of Cuba.

The role of social media in this protest is particularly important as it greatly enhances the possibility of bringing together larger crowds and enables participants to share and make visible the repressive responses to the protests (see Tufekci, 2017; Henken, 2021). The protest started with a small group continuously sharing content about the demonstration on social media; this led to many people spontaneously joining the protest, including famous artists. Although there have been protests before, they always only included a small number of people due to the restrictions on freedom of assembly in Cuba. Furthermore, and for the first time in Cuban history, the protests were filmed on such a great scale. This resulted in a great body of evidence on the amount of people attending the protest as well as the fact that state officers used pepper spray on non-violent protesters. This evidence was an important tool against the government campaign that followed the demonstration, as it was countering the profile created by official state media around the demonstration and the activists. Roberto [12], a Cuban migrant who lives in Spain and has many connections with Cuban activists who were involved in the protest described the aftermath of the protest:

> Everyone is very paranoid there, the police, the intelligence, the kind of political police are very dangerous, so they have the right to make you disappear and not even your mother knows where you are. And that is what can happen any time since these things have started, you know. It has happened every day since this has started. The government just disappeared everyone. So yeah. They are doing this serious campaign. And they are calling them terrorists right now [referring to the protesters]. On national television. Which is like the maximum charge you can have in Cuba. You can even have like a death [penalty]...I mean they do not kill, but the name of the charge is the same: *pena de muerte*.

Hence digital media, particularly social media, makes new forms of collective organisation possible and more visible, and musicians increasingly use these opportunities to create additional spaces for expressing themselves. However, this is simultaneously bringing about new forms of repression.

Collective action is often based on opposing perceived social injustice, which requires people, amongst many other things, to recognise oppression as a social construct that they can actively change, as captured by Welzel and Appadurai in the concepts 'emancipative values' and 'capacity to aspire'. Many research participants highlighted how difficult it is to oppose existing power structures in Cuba because of psychological obstacles. Roberto, for example, explained how censorship in Cuba has conditioned him to be cautious in expressing criticism on the Cuban situation even when he is abroad. He stated:

> The beginning of my first trips, I spent like years talking about the system going like, “ssshhh”. Even if I were in Norway, even if I were in Berlin, even if I were in Mexico: “ssshh, you’re talking too loud”.

Because two generations have already been born in a country where dissenting ideas are often silenced, participants argue that Cubans’ capacity to recognise social injustice has been affected too (interview Roberto, 2020). The eradication of dissenting ideas and the isolation from the rest of the world leaves people with little room to aspire toward alternative realities.

It seems however that digital media has a substantial impact on the capacity to aspire and in turn enhances collective action. Like-minded artists and intellectuals who do not agree with revolutionary ideas are now able to connect and observe the great amount of support through for example critical posts on social media, highlighting the important role of what Tufekci (2017) calls the “digital networked public sphere”. This could help Cubans to overcome the feeling of isolation that results from fear and guilt over dissenting ideas (see Tufekci, 2017; Henken, 2021). One good example is that of the hip-hop song *Patria y Vida* [13] which was released in 2021 by a combination of critical, more mainstream and very popular Cuban artists. [14] It strongly criticises the government’s recent acts of repression and the overall political-economic system, and has played an extensive role in overcoming fear and isolation; it triggered a large response, as thousands of supportive comments appeared under the video. In an interesting parallel to abusive relationships, during a meeting with the European Parliament, Yotuel Romero, from Orishas, explains how the internet contributes to people’s capacity to aspire, as it provides the awareness of the existence of alternative options:

> The abuser [referring to the Cuban government] needs you to believe that he is your only option, because isolation is the fundamental part of his modus operandi: ‘nobody wants you out there’, ‘I am your only option’, ‘you are very lucky to have me’, ‘without me, you’re nothing’. In my country, the internet, for the people, arrived recently. Do you know why? Because it is a window, it is a window to see what happens outside the house, since the door is not open. [15]

Discussion

In this article, we have critically examined the role of digital media in the empowerment of Cuban musicians in the context of the ongoing digital revolution. Cuba’s particular situation makes it a fascinating and novel case in debates on digital technology, digital media and the music industry itself. For one thing, music in Cuba has commercial value as well as great political value; hence the reason for the government to remain in control of the music sector. In addition, access to the internet and digital media for a wider audience is not only very recent, but also limited; in a context of general economic hardship

and a trade embargo, access to basic tools such as mobile phones, computers and bank accounts is limited. Hence the digital divide needs to be taken seriously (Álvarez et al, 2015), although Cubans are used to dealing with these difficulties in creative and inventive ways (Venegas, 2010; Cearns, 2021).

In spite of Cuba's traditionally high levels of state investment in music and cultural education, formal employment opportunities in the music sector largely depend on one's position in society and one's connections, as well as the music genre and state acceptability. The digital revolution plays into these dynamics in multiple contradictory ways. On one hand, digital media – particularly social media and music distribution and commercialization platforms – offers potential for more equal employment opportunities as it allows for deepening the possibilities of informal work through independent music activities. These processes are not new and have partly been set in pace from earlier on, yet musicians do see enhanced access to the internet for larger groups of Cubans, and resulting increased access to international social media and streaming platforms, as an important current and potential contribution to their wider visibility and success. On the other hand, the extent to which musicians can benefit from these opportunities in turn largely depends on their resources, such as connections with Cubans abroad or the opportunity to travel abroad themselves. The structural problems of poverty, institutional racism and unequal distribution of resources cannot be solved by digital media alone. Currently, independent musicians mainly use digital media to enhance their visibility rather than to earn money from streaming platforms, as Lamacchia (2017) also noted for Argentinean independent musicians. Most of them have not yet reached a point where power relations with digital conglomerates and the global music industry would start to play a role.

For the few who manage to achieve economic success through streaming platforms – and thus enhance existential empowerment – a related problem is that success is tightly linked to the visibility of the musician. However, the very same visibility can have the side effects of government intervention, either through punitive repercussions or encapsulation. Interestingly, here the behaviour of government agencies is similar to that of major music industry labels (Morrow & Fangjun, 2016): they encapsulate famous independent musicians and benefit from their already established popularity. Clearly, the Cuban music sector is digitalising in unique ways. The increased accessibility of the internet and digital media does not necessarily lead to equal opportunities or empowerment outcomes; indeed, existing power structures and inequalities play into it (Gerbaudo, 2012). So far, existing institutions – particularly the Cuban music agencies – have not lost their comparative advantage or power position. In addition, new digital media – enabled by wider internet access – are not necessarily reducing the importance of typical Cuban informal digital networks such as el paquete for musicians, but rather emerging as a parallel opportunity (Cearns, 2021) – yet with higher perceived freedom of expression for certain voices and genres. [16] Indeed, a complex intermixing of social dy-

namics, power relations and old and new technological materiality is emerging (Tufekci, 2017).

When it comes to institutional empowerment, our research shows how digital media sits at the centre of the powerplay between the Cuban government and critical Cuban musicians. This is because artists and music, through digital media, are playing key roles in expressing the desire of Cuban youth for change. Recent offline displays of collective action, while starting out as protests against new government regulations that affect musicians, have accelerated and become self-reinforcing through social media. Indeed, musicians and other artists have played an important role in Cuba's recent non-stop sociopolitical mobilizations enabled by social media, as Henken (2021) describes them. These offline and online mobilizations mirror many of the points made by researchers on the influence of digital tools such as social media – and the "digital networked public sphere" – on social movements, empowerment and collective action: their roles in rapidly gathering large crowds for a common goal and making them highly visible; live broadcasting protests and repression; breaking people's isolation, compliance and fear by discovering collectivity; and creating a clear sense of community and belonging (Henken, 2021; Tufekci, 2017). Social media is an important element in the self-reinforcing nature of collective action in Cuba; online activists invoke physical protests and strikes and the images and videos subsequently spread through social media. Simultaneously this provokes more restrictive actions by the government in a repeating cycle of action-visibility-repression. This cycle was clearly visible during recent events that were reported on social media via texts, photos and videos, namely with the arrest of Denis Solis, the hunger strike by the San Isidro movement to demand the freedom of Denis Solis, the arrest of the members of the movement, and finally the protest on the 27 of November. The protest, in turn, resulted again in increased repression including internet outages, a government campaign against the protestors, surveillance of their houses and a significant increase of military presence in the streets.

Indeed digital media is a widespread action resource that can contribute to collective action and 'democratisation from below' (Acquier et al, 2017). As self-reinforcing, it can create a common sense of satisfaction and solidarity (Tufekci, 2017) which can again lead to more action. This is very clearly visible in Cuba; the element of collectivism and solidarity is particularly strong in protest, pointing to an important element of Cuba's current youth activism and level of dissatisfaction. Yet, while youth become increasingly vocal in their calls for change, this change is not necessarily envisioned as a 'western' model of change. Cuban youth highlight issues of collectivism and solidarity rather than individual achievement or responsibility, and they have emphasised particular issues such as racial inequalities (Perry, 2018; Venegas, 2010).

Digital media has enticed the capacity to aspire amongst musicians as well as a broader critical group of youth in Cuba; it provides ways to envision alternatives, further leading to collective action and institutional empowerment.

This enticement of the capacity to aspire is also caused by the internet at large, with the arrival of alternative international sources of information (Henken, 2021). Yet social media (and to a lesser extent also streaming platforms) enables people to also share and communicate views, information and experiences horizontally (Henken, 20221), and create and share their own expressions and art in a much wider community, which can have much larger implications. Musicians have particularly taken advantage of the opportunities that international social media has provided them in deepening their independence and decreasing the government's traditional control over their expression, which is indeed increasingly difficult to control and repress in the current online platforms. Hence for many independent musicians currently their individual expression is inseparable from their collective empowerment and action, a process that has deepened with the parallel developments of access to new digital media and increased repression.

The paradox is of course that the government has slowly provided more freedom in terms of internet access yet, at the same time, uses the internet for repression and surveillance and increased control over artistic expression. The counter-song *Patria o muerte por la Vida*, the government-orchestrated response to the critical *Patria y vida* song mentioned above, also shows how the Cuban state is using digital media and music itself in new ways to influence the online public sphere, beyond mere direct repression (Henken, 2021; Tufecki, 2017). However, the combination of face-to-face and digital collective action by the music and art community seems unstoppable. Of course, longer term predictions are extremely complex in this situation; and whether struggles with collective decision making and leadership creation (Tufekci, 2017) will cause problems for these movements in the long run, is difficult to say.

Clearly, our analysis mostly deals with musicians' interactions with governments, since power relations and interactions with the music industry and technological 'giants' are not yet so clearly visible. Long-term research would be necessary to unpack these evolving power relations. It would also be interesting to explore how income generation through the secondary use of music is changing the options and power positions for Cuban musicians (Negus, 2019; Tessler, 2016). Future research could also further discuss Cuban musicians and the music industry in a transnational context, for example regarding the roles of the United States, European and other governments and diaspora groups. For example, Cuban musicians have also faced new types of 'transnational censorship' in the United States, with right-wing activists from the Cuban diaspora such as Alex Otaola successfully organising boycotts of Cuban artists like Gente de Zona and Haila Mompie in Miami (Salomon, 2020).

This research was conducted in a particularly interesting and unique period, in which Cubans' livelihoods were increasingly threatened and political tensions aggravated over time. In such tumultuous times, it will be important to follow the evolution of the general economic and political situation as well as how the positions and roles of musicians unfold within this uncertain land-

scape. More recently, offline and online activism and protests have only become more massive [17], and have clearly moved beyond the musical and artistic community to involve a much wider range of Cubans. It has also focused on broader issues beyond freedom of expression, such as human livelihoods, survival and lack of food following the Covid crisis. Hence the role of vocal musicians has been instrumental in enhancing such widespread activism across digital and physical spheres. Without a doubt, musicians and their music have always played prominent roles in Cuba's history (Álvarez et al, 2017). They will continue to do so in this rapidly changing country as the internet and digital media continue to influence the landscape in highly paradoxical ways.

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Notes

1 Digital technologies and media have transformed twenty-first-century global society in rapid and widespread ways, leading to what is often called a digital revolution. In Cuba, the term digital revolution is also more specifically used (e.g. Henken & García Santamaría, 2021) to refer to the profound informational, communicational, and technological revolution that has erupted within the Cuban Revolution since the introduction of

digital technology, including the reconfiguration of state-citizen relations and the remaking of the Cuban media landscape.

2 Digital technologies are electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. Digital media is an important part of that: it consists of any digitized information broadcasted or communicated to an audience. This is broader than only social media or digital social networks (including also music distribution and commercialization platforms for example). We mostly use the concept of digital media in this article, since it is most precise in relation to musicians and the music industry. However, digital media is always enabled by broader digital technologies such as the Internet; therefore we refer to debates about digital technology too, and where necessary we will differentiate their impacts.

3 Coleman (2010) divided ethnography approaches into three sub-approaches. One of the categories comes closest to our methods, as it explores "the vernacular cultures of digital media, evinced by discrepant phenomena, digital genres, and groups – hackers, blogging, Internet memes, and migrant programmers – whose logic is organized significantly around, although not necessarily determined by, selected properties of digital media."

4 Five out of the eleven musicians are living in Cuba at the moment of the interview, and had not lived off the island before.

5 Six of the interviewed musicians are considered to have a successful music career, meaning they are widely known or have music as their main source of income.

6 The music styles represented by the participants include (Afro-Cuban) jazz, reggae, hip hop, reggaeton and son.

7 Welzel's conceptualisation of empowerment is helpful here, though his overall theory of how societies reach empowerment can be criticised, also from a Cuban perspective.

8 Although psychological empowerment would be relevant in the Cuban context, this type of empowerment particularly is characterised as a process, and can therefore only be appropriately studied as part of a longitudinal research.

9 This applies when there is a large social radius of people with similar resources.

10 Pseudonym.

11 Grupo Movimiento San Isidro grew from 3.217 followers in 2020 to 12.300 followers in 2022.

12 Pseudonym.

13 This sentence rebukes to Cuba's official slogan 'homeland or death'.

14 Yotuel Romero, Descemer Bueno, Gente de Zona, Maykel Osorbo and El Funky.

15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYhvM1AmwEA&t=1266s.

16 Interestingly, new digital media comes with opportunities but may also introduce new racialized and gendered exclusions, and in that sense the pre-existing digital media such as *el paquete* may sometimes be preferable for musicians. For example, when comparing the *paquete* to YouTube, Levine argues that "through the implementation of the *paquete*'s USB memory stick-based circulations, artists find a means to circulate music directly to audiences without anonymous, racially charged comments placed alongside their content" (2021, p. 154)

17 On the 11 and 12 July massive protests filled the streets throughout Cuban cities, upon which the government arrested 790 people that were joining the protest on serious charges (CNN, 2022).

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