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From the internet for freedom to the internet of self-censorship?

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In February 2021, large technology companies concentrated 13 out of every 100 dollars valued on the Wall Street Stock Exchange, surpassing the commercialization of armaments.

If physical geography, the availability of domesticable plants and animals, and belonging to the temperate climate strip in which they were able to expand on both sides of the Fertile Crescent (Diamond, 2020) determined the superiority of European societies to colonize much of the world, contemporary geopolitics is becoming determined by agents that interact outside physical space and operate in an intangible way.

The classic capitalist contradiction between the character of labor (increasingly social, that is, increasingly needing to be carried out with more people and / or organized groups) and that of capital (increasingly concentrated) manifests itself in times of the Internet as a handful of American companies known as GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft) or GAFAT (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Twitter), which increasingly concentrate the metadata resulting from the increasingly intense and comprehensive activity that human beings carry out through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

The commercialization of this metadata (Wilson, 2019) allows a level of efficiency in advertising – whether travel, consumer goods or political projects – which has only multiplied the effectiveness with which those who previously concentrated most of the resources of all kinds. They benefit from the increasingly unfair distribution of wealth and its control over communication processes.

Social networks are not the novelty: from the sociological point of view they have always existed among humans (Wasserman; Faust, 1994). Each person already belonged to overlapping networks of family, friends, community, work, students or unions, long before TikTok, Linkedin or Instagram burst into our lives. But the increasing use of these platforms has made these previously invisible systems of relationships tangible and capitalizable. Each search, each exchange, each publication of text, video or photos, and those who interact with them, as well as the metadata that accompanies them (date, time, gender, topic and geographical location of the participants, among others) are used to find, connect and intentionally use affinities and phobias at a speed previously unthinkable. This process is possible thanks to technological developments such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence (Bello-Orgaz; Jung; Camacho, 2016).

In February 2021, large technology companies concentrated 13 out of every 100 dollars valued on the Wall Street Stock Exchange (Carbajal, 2021), surpassing the commercialization of armaments. Speaking of armaments, one might ask whether investment in psychological warfare, understood — according to the U.S. Army Manual — as the action of "influencing foreign populations, expressing information subjectively to influence attitudes and behavior, and to obtain compliance, non-interference, or other desired behavioral changes" (Headquarters, 2005), is not part of those economic values, in a scenario of new hybrid wars led by the US political-military apparatus and intelligence community.

Hybrid warfare is a term whose use has been increasing among several theorists (Bartolomé, 2019; Gavrov, 2017; Piella, 2019) to refer to the combination of economic aggression, irregular warfare, financing of an internal opposition, psychological warfare, terrorism, regular war, economic blockade and sabotage, and cyberwarfare. **In Latin America, the two countries in which this mixture of methods to change the regime has been most used by the United States are Cuba and Venezuela (Sánchez, 2020).** Its

culmination has come during the Trump administration, and supposed, in the Cuban case, the approval of 243 economic restriction measures (MINREX, 2021), with millionaire financing to Internet media and opposition groups, which in November 2020 articulated a soft coup conato with the support of the US embassy in Havana (Robinson, 2021); this had its aggravated version on July 11. On this occasion it was a concerted operation in the digital public space.

In a scenario of increase in the main indicators of evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a result of the entry and circulation of more aggressive variants to some areas of the country, a coordinated campaign was developed from abroad replicating mechanisms and protagonists already used on the occasion of the coup d'état in Bolivia and in interventions against Venezuela, among others. According to Spanish analyst Julián Macías Tovar, the operation was structured in three phases: the first made use of the SOS Cuba label, "requesting help through false and automated accounts that massively mentioned artists from all over the world." The second phase installed in the media the request for a "humanitarian corridor" and invoked the support of artists. The third phase consisted of demonstrations that were accompanied by maximum diffusion in networks and the use of labels that became a global trend. "The method is repeated, the synergistic strategy in networks, media and mobilizations" (Macías Tovar, 2021); the intensive use of robots, algorithms and accounts created for the occasion or with automated patterns, fake news and manipulated images, in addition to the invisibility of different manifestations of support for the government and the Cuban Revolution.

The analysis of some of the key profiles in this operation in networks shows a relationship with the Atlas Network organization, linked, on the one hand, to conservative *think tanks* and supporters of the free market in Latin America and, on the other, to the US government itself through the National Fund for Democracy (Indymedia Argentina, 2021).

How the internet has changed

If in the past the computer was for many only synonymous with IBM, and general motors car, **today, for most earthlings, the internet is synonymous with Facebook and Google, and operating system means Android or Windows.**

The regression of the Internet – from an ideal element for free expression, knowledge, communication and equity, to a space of political polarization and hatred – has generated multiple alarms. Barack Obama himself has expressed concern about it. The former president of the United States has been one of the main promoters of the Internet, which he considered during the most important intervention in his visit to Havana, without any nuance, "one of the strongest growth engines in the history of humanity" (Obama, 2016). However, during a more recent interview with British Prince Harry, he drew attention to how social media can divide societies (Yeginsu, 2017).

The alerts were not lacking: on May 18, 2012 a joint statement by a group of civil society organizations ahead of the United Nations meeting in Geneva for "Enhanced Cooperation on Public Policy Issues Related to the Internet" pointed out that "what was a public network of millions of digital spaces, it is now largely a conglomeration of spaces of a few owners" (Joint Civil Society Statement, 2012).

The revelations (Hu, 2015) of the former analyst of the National Security Agency, Edward Snowden, about how adversary governments, and also allies, critical infrastructures and citizens of any country can be spied on even in their most intimate relations by the US intelligence apparatus, with total impunity, were not known at the time.

The Covid-19 pandemic increased the permanence of people in the networks, and therefore, the profitability with which US internet companies operate. On average, users spend about 6 hours and 42 minutes on the internet each day in 2021, almost the same amount of time spent on sleep; and of the seven most visited sites, only one is not hosted on US servers (Social, 2021).

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Any company or political party can today microlocate the recipients of a message, on a network such as Facebook, or in the results of a search engine such as Google, based on age, gender, geographical location and professional profile. This is how a product or a news item is positioned. Cambridge Analytica went a step further (Wilson, 2019) by systematizing in political types the profiles of users on Facebook to adapt to each one the message for which the advertisers paid him: "Hillary is corrupt", and perhaps it is, but no less than this procedure used to win the elections. The election of Donald Trump owes something to it (Berghel, 2018), as well as Brexit (Heawood, 2018) and other processes where money has managed to transform itself into the action of technological tools to intervene reality and push it in the direction in which the powerful consider.

The logic of a system that turns everything it touches into a commodity has found in trade with the data derived from the use of the internet a way of expanding towards what has been called "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017).

To blame the internet, and not the economic and political asymmetry of the pre-existing physical world, with the economic, political and military hegemony that has gained control over it, would be a mistake. It is so to ignore that it is part and consequence of the dynamics of operation of a system that tends to the concentration of financial and material resources in fewer and fewer hands.

In the name of freedom of expression on the Internet, the United States disqualifies Moscow and Beijing, but as Evgeny Morozov points out, one does not have to agree with the way in which Russia and China regulate freedom of expression to realize a difference, at least in speeches, of the three powers: Russians and Chinese defend access to data generated by their citizens on their own soil. while the United States intends to access, and in fact accesses, data generated by anyone anywhere (Morozov, 2015). And when countries that Washington considers democracies (such as Brazil during the government of Dilma Rousseff) tried to establish sovereignty over the data of their citizens and force them to be stored on servers located on their territory, they were immediately deterred.

Latin America, America's digital backyard?

The main point of exchange of Latin American traffic is not in the region, but in Miami: the NAP of the Americas. Even in countries blocked by the United States, such as Cuba and Venezuela (Social, 2021), the use of US social media platforms predominates, and it is through them that Washington has stimulated and articulated regime change agendas in those countries (Elizalde, 2019).

In particular, any analysis of the use and access to the Internet in Cuba must start from the more than 60 years of aggressions of all kinds by the United States government against the Island. A report approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations by 187 votes in favor, 3 against and 2 abstentions (Nations, 2019) documents in 922,630 million dollars the damages caused to the Cuban economy by this policy since its inception, taking into account the depreciation of the dollar against gold. The same report sets at $55 million the damage of U.S. restrictions on Cuban telecommunications in 2018, including the denial of access (censorship) to "top-of-the-line technological sites, which hinders self-preparation or remote training. Such are the cases of Cisco, VMWARE, Google Code, Google Web Designer and Google Page Speed Insights" (Cuba, 2019: 26).

A May 2021 information from the Union of Computer Scientists of Cuba establishes that **there are more than 50 technological information and electronic commerce sites whose access is blocked on the Island by the United States government**, including platforms such as Zoom, and most software repositories (Guevara, 2021).

From the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, Washington allocated significant financial resources to propaganda against Cuba, starting in 1960 with Radio Cuba Libre (Radio Swan) until the creation in 2018 by the government of Donald Trump of the Internet Task Force for Cuba; passing through Radio Martí (1986) and Televisión Martí (1990) during the Reagan administration. With the advent of the Internet, these financings, which average 50 million dollars per year, were transferred to the network. Radio Televisión Martí alone has received $36.1 million in one year (*Cuba Encuentro*, 2006). Other projects, always associated with Internet communication, received in the first three years of the Trump administration, through the Agency for International Development, about 50 million dollars; in turn, the aforementioned National Endowment for Democracy received 23 million dollars for what they call "democracy promotion projects" in Cuba (Project, 2021).

The Cuban government's policy with Radio and Television Martí, and some other media that directly receive that funding, has been to block access to its contents, while others that may even have more aggressive positions, but are not dedicated exclusively to propaganda against Cuba (*El Nuevo Herald*, *El Diario de las Américas*, *ABC).*) are accessible from the Island. It is therefore a question of defending national sovereignty against external aggression and not of an act of censorship.

The growing access to social networks in Cuba is illustrated by the fact that in January 2021 7.7 million internet users were reported, of which 6.28 million are users of social networks, out of a total population of 11 million inhabitants (Social, 2021). In this context, platforms have become the main stage of action to disseminate the content produced by the media paid for by Washington. A report by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) had released in its projections for 2019 that "working with cuban independent journalists and encouraging citizens to create user-generated content on the island for OCB platforms (Office of Broadcasts to Cuba, for its acronym in English, which operates Radio and Television Martí) remains an absolute priority."

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OCB's digital strategy has become a social network consistent with the metrics that place YouTube, Google and Facebook among the most visited sites in Cuba. With the use of AVRA technology, Radio Martí's programs evolved into visual radio and were broadcast through Facebook Live along with TV Martí programming. This provides OCB with an efficient and cost-effective additional distribution output for both its radio (visual radio) and television content. In fiscal year 2018, OCB will establish digital teams on the island to create unbranded local Facebook accounts to disseminate information. Native pages increase the chances of appearing in the news feeds of Cuban Facebook users. The same strategy will be replicated in other preferred social networks (Governors, 2019:31).

As Internet users relate to Internet content through intermediaries (social networks and search engines), the companies that manage these intermediaries become the eyes and ears of those who believe they browse the internet (Pariser, 2011). That the intermediaries used by Latin Americans are all Americans is not exactly the path of the many times mentioned second independence of the region.

Is there an alternative?

The integrationist processes of Latin America saw their boom pass with the realization of few projects in the ICT area. One of those is the ALBA 1 submarine cable, which allowed Cuba access to the internet from Venezuela, which extends from Camurí, near the port of La Guaira, in the State of Vargas (Venezuela), to Siboney Beach, in Santiago de Cuba. While the U.S. blockade made it impossible to connect the country to the dense network of cables near the Cuban coasts (for example the one that runs along the Cancun-Miami route, just 32 km from the Havana Malecon), it was necessary to lay for 1062 km at a cost of 70 million dollars (*Cubadebate*, 2010).

The multinational information multiplatform TeleSur is another such project. But at the continental level, extra-regional companies have prevailed over alliances among Latin Americans in search of technological sovereignty and the use of the cultural and linguistic unity that characterizes the region.

The internet model assumed as "gratuity" of the search service (Google) or social networks (Facebook) is based on these companies selling audiences to others who pay to reach the selected segment of their billions of users (Pimienta; Leal, 2018); and those who pay the most will always arrive first, although not necessarily with more truth or with products of higher cultural or educational quality.

The practically infinite availability of content, and the fact that any user from any location can become a provider of images, sounds, videos or texts, have not meant a diversification of the consumption of cultural products by audiences. On the contrary, a good part of these users, due to the phenomena of induction and social control, which far from diminishing have deepened with the extension of the Internet, are imitators of the cultural models that radiate from the United States over Latin America and that already before the arrival of the Internet dominated the screens of Latin American televisions and movie theaters, as Fabio Nigra points out.

The interaction between loyalty – for having managed to define the taste of the spectator – and economic power is unbeatable: through concentration large capitals do not compete with each other and manage to penetrate markets for the good ones, offering good quality

products at prices more than accessible for their production on a scale; or the bad ones, starting with commercial and economic pressures, intertwining one's own needs with the push capacity that the United States government can exercise, through economic support, direct or indirect subsidies, restrictions on the productions of other countries, threats of blockades or sanctions, interstate agreements where, with the appearance of mutual convenience, a reduction in costs is achieved for the producer, whose capital is transnational, but based in the United States, and so on. At the same time, with the establishment of easily understandable narrative formulas, together with the appeal to an aesthetic that, although it was built over the years (classical montage, naturalism in the performances and scenarios, linearity in the evolution of the plot), after much trial and error admitted to delimit what is going to have a result in the viewer and what would not achieve the intended effect; both elements allowed to obtain a high percentage of guarantee of commercial success (with the necessary ups and downs) (2020).

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As a regional whole, Latin America still produced in the 90s of the twentieth century only 46.5% of its total television programming on open television and imported the remaining 53.5%, of which half – 25.5% – came from the United States. In the cinema, in the country with the highest production (Argentina) at its best, national production was substantially minority on the screens compared to the United States (15% against 77%) (DEISICA, Department of Study and Research of the Argentine Film Industry Union).

The "alternative" to this situation, which emerged with the rise of the Internet, has not been a Latin American chain of audiovisual content in cinema, series, music or shows, but the presence of Netflix in homes in the region. Less than 30% of Internet access in Latin America is to sites of local origin, and that access is mostly associated with trade and financial services, not cultural products (Sharma; Arese Lucini, 2016).

World Stats reported that, in May 2020, in Africa only 39.3% of people accessed the internet, compared to 87.2% of Europeans and 94.6% of North Americans; while in Latin America the level of connectivity reached 68.9%. But while the digital divide has

decreased, the cultural divide has increased and the influence of sectors historically aligned with U.S. policies towards the region cannot be said to be minor, something visible in the neoliberal reflux that followed the fall of the Zelaya government in Honduras and the subsequent processes with which figures such as Jair Bolsonaro and Juan Orlando Hernández came to government. More internet, in the conditions of Latin America, has not always been synonymous with more democracy.

Thanks to the Internet, diversity can be better spread, but homogeneity has been imposed more effectively and in a more accelerated way. All voices, all languages, may have their place in the network of networks, but the hegemonic speakers of the physical world have multiplied their influence in it.

As we already mentioned, the intensive use of ICTs and the dissemination of false information in the political campaigns of Jair Bolsonaro, in the post-electoral coup process in Bolivia in 2019 or in the recent events in Cuba, are not an example of service to Latin American democracy (Elizalde; Molina, 2020).

"Universal socialization tools have become the enabler of U.S. global surveillance."

Since June 2019, people applying for a U.S. visa have to submit their social media profiles, email addresses and phone numbers they have used in the last five years (Garcia, 2019). We know that mass surveillance, understood as the monitoring of people's behavior, has always been the great temptation of authoritarian powers, however, today,

we are witnessing democracies that have developed sophisticated clandestine surveillance networks putting into play the very tradition of which they are supposed to be part (Ramonet; Assange, Chomsky and Sacristan, 2016). This is how universal socialization tools have become the enabler of global surveillance of the United States, which will not stop using that information even if, as will happen in most cases, it decides to deny visas to applicants.

One derivative of that decision is self-censorship: How many people will limit their expression on the internet because they ever plan to apply for a U.S. visa?

If the hegemonic actors of the cultural industry, whose influence has multiplied with the internet and social networks, exert a great seduction on the populations of the planet, selling the *American dream;* the realization of the journey towards that dream requires the self-censorship of the aspirants to put their heads on the not always fluffy pillow of Uncle Sam.

It has not been enough for the United States to access the servers of the main Internet companies, nor the ability to, using global networks, attack critical infrastructures of its adversaries – as it has done with Venezuela (TeleSur, 2019) or Iran (Chen; Abu-Nimeh, 2011)—; violate the rules of free trade – as it has just done with the Chinese company Huawei (Ciucan, 2020); inducing social media behavior to overthrow governments that are hostile to it; in addition to building false leaders; to turn into truths, based on almost infinite repetitions, the most obvious lies; and viciously persecuting those who use them to disseminate information that is uncomfortable for them – remember Assange – or harassing to the point of suicide those who advocate – such as Aaron Swartz – for a truly democratic internet at the service of all (KNAPPENBERGER, 2017).

Alliances between US tech companies and the State Department were very convincingly exposed (Assange, 2014). Its bipartisan character can be attested to by one of the most important executives of the king of Internet searches: Jared Cohen, whom Assange calls "Google's director of regime change", and who worked with both Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton and then went on to direct Google Ideas.

The attempt to lead digital activism in Latin America also began early for the State Department when in November 2010 the Personal Democracy Forum Latin America (PDF) was held, which convened "the main digital leaders of the region to discuss with other digital leaders of the world, how technology breaks into politics." There, the *Department's* Director of Innovation, Alec Rossles, assured bloggers and tweeters in the region that the internet is the "Che Guevara of the twenty-first century" (Ross, 2010; Ross; Scott, 2011). Imagine, for a moment, Che Guevara handing over to Washington all the metadata of Latin Americans, along with email addresses, their social media profiles and phone numbers.

While the U.S. government has dealt with cyberactivists in Latin America and especially trained and funded them for the changes it wants to see in the region (Falcón, 2020), the lefts that have been or are government have lacked popular education strategies for digital sovereignty.

Teaching programs at all levels of education are lacking to train not only critical recipients, but active participants capable of creatively harnessing the potential of the internet.

Studies point to the absence of relevant local content and the lack of skills in the population as the main constraints to digital inclusion (Sharma; Arese Lucini, 2016). Can there be a break with the geopolitical control external to the region without solving these aspects, if regional alliances both at the governmental level and social subjects with institutional support for the development of infrastructures and platforms for the production of content are conspicuous by their absence?

The answer is the same for other challenges: regional integration. Only with it, computerization from below, with ventures that meet the needs of communities in the digital environment, accompanied by an education that enhances and stimulates the cultural and sovereign use of ICTs, would contribute to the social change demanded by the region.

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