

## COMMENTS ON

### “The Political Economy of the Internet in Cuba” by Valdés and Rivera

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We are grateful that CubaNet was invited to participate in the discussion of the paper “The Political Economy of the Internet in Cuba” by Nelson P. Valdés and Mario A. Rivera. This paper ought to be praised for the detailed chronology presented on the topic of the Internet and Cuba; however, certain themes presented by Valdés and Rivera deserve a rebuttal.

Assuming that both of us accept the necessity of changes in Cuba, our main discrepancy with this paper rests on how it is contemplated that the Internet could promote these changes. The following quotation from the paper permits to posit these differences. Valdés and Rivera state: “If there is to be a subversive effect to be found for the Internet, it might be here (research, academic, and cultural institutions), rather than in the still hypothetical instance of individual subscribers.” CubaNet, on the contrary, sees the individual subscriber, without the controlling ties of government, as the catalyst for these needed changes.

Keeping this difference of opinion in mind, it becomes easy to explain why Rivera and Valdés see the technical and economic difficulties as significant issues hampering the development of the Internet in Cuba. This is a contradistinction to CubaNet's position, which identifies the Cuban government as the primary obstacle in this development. Unequivocally, technical and economic difficulties are real, but were these to be a genuine concern of the Cuban government, investments would resolve these issues

very quickly. Instead, a recent example demonstrates that the regime would prefer to spend its monetary resources in controlling the Internet rather than solving its technical difficulties. For instance, functionaries of the Department of State informed us that their access from Cuba to CubaNet's Web page was blocked. Similar action was taken against other embassies and accredited foreign journalists in Cuba. As far as we know, *El Nuevo Herald* was also blocked. This is not the most salutary investment expected of a government with limited economic resources trying to solve technical difficulties.

Another point of contention with this paper is the apparent insignificance assigned to the role of the individual subscribers to the Internet. They state: “...Cubans have not already acted to bring about such changes because they do not know their own political, social or economic realities.” It appears that the intention of the authors is to argue that Cubans do not need prodding from foreign lands to understand their reality and act accordingly, a point that we not only share, but it also makes us happy that in their paper they consider CubaNet an organization that behaves under those premises. We thank the authors.

However, and now back to the discussion of the original statement, it is possible to interpret this phrase differently. Although it is true that there have been important steps taken by Cubans in the island, their isolation and lack of information prevents better coordination among members of the civil society in

Cuba; and were this information to be available, the impact of their actions would be exponentially greater. Some examples are illustrative of the potential for change. If most of the farmers in Pinar del Rio were fully aware, maybe only minimally aware, of the independent farmers co-ops in Jutinicú, Santiago de Cuba, they would probably act differently to solve their food crisis and maybe they would try to create their own co-op in coordination with Antonio Alonso in Jutinicú. Similarly, if people who like to read throughout the island knew about the independent libraries in Las Tunas, chances are they would like to start one too. Parenthetically, both the Jutinicú co-op and the independent libraries in Las Tunas have their Webpages, but one can only wonder what would happen if most Cubans in the island had access to them.

Many more examples could demonstrate that the free flow of information to the individuals, that is the Internet, could make, as the saying goes, “A Big Difference.” So, yes, often Cubans do not know their own political, social or economic realities, and the Internet could change this.

It is this recurrent theme, the apparent dismissal of the importance of the individual citizen in contrast to individuals in the system, as agents of change, that leads to the conclusion by Valdés and Rivera that “efforts by the United States as a matter of policy to demand a laissez faire approach to Internet access on the part of Cuba might only produce counterproductive reaction.” CubaNet believes that the efforts of any government to help individual Cubans attain ac-

cess to the Internet should be praised. The examples previously mentioned show this importance.

As stated at the beginning, we commend this paper for the information it presents, but we differ with their conclusions, which, although couched in an admirable academic discourse, are not acceptable. A final point of disagreement is illustrative of the difference between the policy CubaNet supports and the one in the Valdés and Rivera paper. These authors approvingly quote Ken Hirschkop when he wrote: “One cannot buy democracy off a shelf, or download it from a Web site,” in an apparent reference that individual access to the Internet is not a significant factor in the progress towards democracy by a country.

This perspective inevitably brings to mind images of Johannes Gutenberg in despair as he worked on developing his printing press. Gutenberg had to face many detractors, many of them probably were raising the obvious technical and economic difficulties. However, Gutenberg prevailed, but more importantly, his new technology was not controlled by the governmental power elite. This meant that any citizen, who could afford it, could have access to it. This propelled the dissemination of information to magnitudes never imagined before, which then engendered an explosion of information and resulted directly in the progress and democracy we now enjoy. Primarily because the use of printing press was not limited to the governmental power elite, the average citizen in Europe benefited. Likewise, the average citizens of Cuba, “el cubano de a pie,” would benefit if the Internet were not limited to such elite.