

# Cuba's cyberwar intensifies

May 22 2009, by Isabel Sanchez

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A Cuban student sets up a blog at home in Havana on May 21, 2009. Cuban bloggers are fighting a cyberwar with the government to give their own version of reality on the communist island.

Cuban bloggers are fighting a cyberwar with the government to give their own version of reality on the communist island, from hotels and using memory sticks and laptops obtained from abroad.

Bloggers with "alternative" agendas say it is becoming harder to evade official censorship, although they have managed to multiply in the past three years in a country where [Internet](#) access is limited.

Havana accuses them of being on the payroll of Washington and other governments in a bid to denigrate the 50-year-old Cuban revolution.

The government argues that it has the right to block sites which

"encourage subversion."

Under names such as "Generacion Y" (Generation Y) -- the internationally-renowned blog of Yoani Sanchez -- or "Retazos" (Snippets) by "El Guajiro Azul" (The Blue Peasant), around 30 blogs touch sensitive themes such as Cuban travel permits, flaws in the health and education systems, political prisoners or daily hardships.

"Their entries are full of worn-out political theories that the US State Department used for years in order to include Cuba on all the black lists," according to the official Cuban portal Cubadebate.cu, where communist leader and former president Fidel Castro publishes his column.

Some local journalists have also fought back against what they call "distorted information" about Cuba found in the blogs.

They recently set up a rival website, blogcip.cu, posting a photo of Yoani Sanchez using the Internet in what they said was a luxurious hotel, alongside the text: "the unhappy girl who sells herself as a victim of ruthless persecution."

"Welcome to the blogosphere!" the 33-year-old Sanchez said in an interview with AFP.

"I didn't say I was in hiding. I prefer to save money to go online and recount the reality that isn't reflected in the Cuban press, which repeats the official discourse," the literature graduate said.

Cubans are not permitted Internet accounts, but can use email services in state cybercafes, without access to navigate the web.

Although several hotels sell Internet connection cards, their cost -- eight

dollars an hour -- is prohibitive in a country where the average monthly salary is 17 dollars.

The government accuses the decades-old US embargo of preventing Cuba from accessing underwater cables and forcing it to use slower satellite connections instead. Work, research and study centers therefore have priority for Internet connections.

Bloggers are hosted by foreign servers, write their texts offline and save them on memory cards before updating their blogs from hotel connections or emailing friends to post their updates abroad.

But the limited options are diminishing.

A hotel from the Spanish Melia chain that was popular with bloggers has now banned Internet services for Cubans, and only permits foreigners or overseas residents to use them, a hotel worker confirmed to AFP.

Sanchez posted a video -- using a hidden camera -- in which a hotel employee explained that the change was due to a new directive from the Tourism Ministry and a communications company, which was also applied by other hotels that have now clamped down on bloggers.

"They want to push us into illegality, to 'underground' accounts. They accuse us buying domains outside of [Cuba](#), but us Cubans cannot buy a '.cu' domain. What do they want, silence?" said Sanchez, winner of the 2008 Spanish Ortega and Gasset prize for digital journalism.

Ivan Garcia, a 40-year-old [blogger](#) who received a laptop from his mother who is a resident in Switzerland, said the new measures aimed to drive bloggers into foreign embassies in order to "accuse us of being supported by foreign governments."

Cubadebate.cu accuses the bloggers of using dubious foreign host services, enjoying privileged resources and advanced tools and taking salaries from the enemy.

Sanchez said she uses a free system and earns a wage -- with which she pays her [blog](#) domain of "hardly 200 euros (280 dollars) per year" -- by writing for foreign media and teaching Spanish to tourists.

In this "fierce war of the blogosphere," as one Cuban newspaper called it, the "cyber-dissidents" and "cyber-communists" -- as both sides call each other -- promise not to cede an inch.

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