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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diasporic Epistemologies in Cuban Independent Journalism

Sara García Santamaría[a] and Ted A. Henken[b]

[a]School of Arts, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; [b]Baruch College, City University of NY, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines how digital diasporic journalism changes epistemic practices in the Cuban context. The last decade has seen a practical transnationalization of digitally native independent news sites in Cuba in light of two phenomena: the emigration/forced exile of many young journalists and the affordances of digital technologies, making it possible for these journalists to continue reporting despite their spatial dispersion abroad. How are digital and diasporic ways of knowing changing Cuban journalists' epistemic practices? By taking a relational approach, we explore digital diasporas as a site of connectivity co-inhabited by multiple and hybrid traveling imaginaries. The article is based on 44 interviews with Cuban independent journalists, which are analyzed through postfoundational discourse analysis (PDA) and situational mapping. The data reveals three important epistemological cleavages that shape digital diasporic journalists' access to knowledge. These are (1) place as an epistemic category, (2) the epistemic status they confer on themselves and other social actors, and (3) the autonomy they claim when constructing clear boundaries between journalism, activism, and propaganda.

KEYWORDS

Digital diasporas; epistemology; epistemic practices; authority; autonomy; independent journalism; alternative media; Cuba

1. Introduction

The rise of global migration means that we need to better understand the role of diasporas in reshaping the ways in which we produce and access knowledge. However, we still know very little about journalists' practices in diasporic communities (Oyeleye 2017). The combination of digital and diasporic journalistic practices entails novel epistemic practices that can threaten journalists' authority and autonomy. On the one hand, diasporic journalists use digital technologies as a way of mediating geographic distance. Reporting from far away, though, complicates journalists' access to first-hand knowledge and can damage their authority as truth-makers and truth-tellers. On the other hand, the journalistic field is changing in relation to both digital and diasporic media, becoming more porous and easily influenced by other logics, threatened from below, such as by activism, or from above, by commercial and technological logics

CONTACT Ted A. Henken theodore.henken@baruch.cuny.edu, t_henken@yahoo.com

(Lindblom, Lindell and Gidlund 2022). These heteronomous forces can put pressure on journalists' autonomy. In light of these challenges, this article aims to unveil how the digital and diasporic condition of Cuban independent journalists is changing their self-perceived epistemic practices, and with which professional consequences.

Once considered "the island of the disconnected," over the last decade (2013–2023) Cuba's digital revolution has accelerated, thanks to growing citizen access to new digital technologies (Henken and García Santamaría 2021). The 2014–2016 US-Cuba thaw put the island in the international spotlight, raising hopes among Cuban journalists for greater independence. These developments emboldened journalists to create independent media projects, allowing them to narrate what seemed a historic moment of change.[1] Ever since, Cuba has been traversing a liminal and interstitial space in its transition from "Castroism" to a less personalized, more institutionalized authoritarian regime (Cearns 2021). As the Revolution's founding, historical generation dies off, the continued legitimacy of Cuba's one-party system (the Cuban Communist Party) is beset by multiple crises, including a new digital challenge to its traditional media hegemony. This has come in the form of digitally native (born online) media projects that declare their editorial independence from the Party.

On the one hand, the economic turmoil that has ravaged the island since at least 2019 has produced unprecedented levels of migration (Mauricio Vicent, *El País*, September 14, 2022). On the other, the growing popularity, reach, and boldness of these emergent independent media outlets have been accompanied by increased repression (García Santamaría 2021). Taken together, these factors have resulted in a practical transnationalization of independent Cuban journalism, with many journalists forced into exile. The affordances of digital technologies make it possible for them to continue reporting about Cuba from abroad (Tufekci 2014). Still, these new digital diasporic ways of knowing have profound epistemic implications, changing how journalists access knowledge and make knowledge claims.

The article is based on 44 semi-structured interviews with Cuban independent journalists, conducted between 2021 and 2023. The interviews are analyzed through a combination of postfoundational discourse analysis (Marttila 2015) and situational mapping (Clarke et al. 2015). The analysis reveals three epistemic cleavages that influence digital diasporic journalists' knowledge claims: (1) (dis)place(ment), (2) redistribution of epistemic authority, and (3) autonomy. In what follows, we explore the main epistemological cleavages of digital journalism and how it has influenced diasporic epistemologies in the global south. This is then contextualized within the Latin American and Cuban context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Epistemological Cleavages of Digital Journalism

There is a body of research that suggests that digital technologies have dislocated, even undermined contemporary journalism, something that brings profound consequences (Broersma and Eldridge 2019). Digital technologies produce epistemic changes insomuch as they enable new ways of acquiring and managing mediated and secondhand knowledge (Godler, Reich, and Miller 2020). Some scholars go so far as to

talk about unique "epistemologies of digital journalism" (Ekström and Westlund 2019, 260) and even "a new chapter in the sociology of knowledge" (Nielsen 2017).

Journalists hold a privileged position in drawing attention to certain people, ideas, and values, engaging in a competition for disseminating legitimate knowledge about the world. Ekström, Lewis, and Westlund (2020, 206) define epistemology as the study of how "journalists know what they know and how knowledge claims are articulated and justified." A key element of knowledge justification is journalists' own epistemic authority, that is, their ability to legitimize their output as valid knowledge about the world (Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2017). Journalists' authority comes with an "epistemic responsibility: differentiating socially valuable knowledge from falsehood, rumors or opinions" (Code 1984, 41). As professionals, journalists build on "epistemological premises" for justifying their knowledge claims (Carlson 2017, 73), evaluating and fact-checking data, sources, and quotes (Ekström and Westlund 2019; Godler et al. 2020). By doing so, they confer epistemic status to themselves and to other social actors, establishing them as "authorized knowers" (Carlson 2017, 124, 127). In everyday parlance, this is called journalistic "credibility."

Journalism is perceived as an authoritative source of knowledge (Zelizer 2009) precisely because it claims to be guided by autonomous decision-making practices. In the literature, autonomy is conceived as journalists' ability to make professional decisions (Örnebring 2013) free from "interference, domination, and regulation" (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 134). Here, autonomy is understood as a gradual perception (Heft and Dogruel 2019) that depends on different actors' position towards it in a given journalistic culture (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013).

Recent scholarship differentiates between journalists' perceived influences on their autonomy, which are subjective, as well as the individual (micro), organizational (meso), and societal (macro) pressures that exist beyond their consciousness (Hanitzsch et al. 2010). Heft and Dogruel (2019) have expanded on these systematic conceptualizations of journalistic autonomy. Professional influences include both the individual and organizational level, such as journalists' ability to perform according to normative standards and their professional judgement, as well as the organizational structures that affect their professional autonomy. Procedural influences relate to their daily work: how things should be done. Finally, journalists' autonomy also depends upon external influences at the individual and organizational level which can be political or economic, but also technological. The latter would include, for instance, the pressure of algorithms in a digital world.

In the digital age, journalists can access first-hand accounts of events without being on the ground, thanks to social media, emerging platforms, and private messaging applications like WhatsApp (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022; Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020). Online sourcing also means that journalists from authoritarian countries can work safely from abroad with minimal risk. However, digital and diasporic journalistic practices also come with new challenges. Research has pointed out a destabilization of the boundaries of the journalistic profession due to the pressure from neighboring fields, such as activism, as well as rapid economic and info-technological changes that can compromise journalists' autonomy (Lindblom, Lindell and Gidlund 2022). While most research on digital epistemologies has focused on Western nation-based cases, it is important to understand how digital practices change journalists' epistemic practices in the global south and its diasporas.

2.2. Journalistic Epistemologies in the Global South and Its Diasporas

Academics from the global south have long decried the systematic prioritization of Western epistemologies in media studies. Western interests and approaches have been understood as the professionally superior "norm" (Enghel and Becerra 2018). However, the universalization of these journalistic norms and practices based on accuracy, objectivity, truthfulness, or accountability does not go uncontested (Mutsvairo et al. 2021). While journalists in Latin America, including Cuba, are often trained under Western/liberal "universal" paradigms, they often support civic, advocacy, and social change roles in practice (Hanitzsch 2019; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Things get even more complicated when such journalists migrate, since they assume a relational nature aimed at connecting the demands of citizens both in the homeland and in the diaspora (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013).

In the digital era, Eldridge (2019) considers that journalism has become an unbounded field inhabited by a range of outsider actors competing for epistemic authority, such as activists, hackers, and community stakeholders. While these actors can be perceived as a threat to professional journalistic practices in established democracies, this is context dependent. In the global south (Porlezza and Arafat 2021), media capture, conflict, and "anti-press harassment" (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2018) make it not only hard, but often undesirable for journalists to follow mainstream journalistic practices (Lugo-Ocando 2020). While comparative research has shown that journalists in the global south support the normative division between activism and journalism, such boundaries are porous in practice (Mellado et al. 2017; Mellado 2020; Sözeri 2016). This has been the case of diasporic journalists from the global south who engage with "identity and rights-driven activism" (Oyeleye 2017, 26) in countries like Egypt (Mollerup 2017), Syria (Arafat 2021), Ethiopia (Skjerdal 2011), and Cuba and Venezuela (García Santamaría and Salojärvi 2020).

While there is a body of work examining how digital technologies have influenced journalists' epistemic practices in the global south, less attention has been paid to place as an epistemic category in itself (Oyeleye 2017; Usher 2020). In this article, we see digital diasporas as a distinct way of doing journalism with the support of digital technologies, which infer distinct "socio-temporal-spatial realities" and epistemic practices (Robertson and Mocanu 2019, 11). This article takes a critical relational approach to digital diasporas inspired by feminist and postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1994) that questions the idea of fixed places of origin and fixed diasporic identities (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022). Instead, Leurs (2022) sees the diaspora as a "travelling" concept, since digital citizens are no longer bound to an ethno-national "locus of enunciation" (Diniz de Figueiredo and Martinez 2021).

Digital diasporic journalists confront two main challenges: that of asserting their new hybrid identities and that of inhabiting the "interstitial spaces created by the intersection of home, diaspora, and the Internet" (Oyeleye 2017, 29). These spaces often come with epistemological clashes with journalistic practices both in their homeland and in their host countries. The following section situates the emergent wave of digitally native alternative media in Latin America, as well as the diasporic shift that has taken place among many Cuban journalists, posing profound epistemic challenges.

2.3. Digitally Native Alternative Media: Cuba in a Latin American Perspective

This article argues that Cuban independent journalism needs to be understood within a broader trend of Latin American digital native alternative media. While the existence of alternative media in itself is not new (Medeiros and Badr 2022), the current wave has flourished in a "digitally native" environment (Steensen and Westlund 2020). Some scholars consider that what makes digital native news sites alternative is their use of technology with social change and emancipatory goals (Harlow 2021). This has been the case in authoritarian contexts with an important diaspora spread around the globe, such as Cuba.

Early works conceived alternative media in binary terms, as opposed to the mainstream. However, there is a new turn that sees alternative media as non-binary, entering in fluid and contingent dialogue with legacy media (Bailey, Cammarts, and Carpentier 2008). Drawing from Martín-Barbero's (1993) work on hybridity, Harlow (2021) talks about a Latin American *mestizaje* in which independent digital news sites do not clearly fit within Western notions of either alternative or mainstream media. While scholars have traditionally seen alternative journalism as occupying a liminal space between activism and professionalism (Atton and Hamilton 2008), in Latin America, nearly two thirds of independent media founders have a journalistic background and roughly fifty percent have won journalistic awards, yet two thirds are committed to social change (SembraMedia 2021).

In this context, Medeiros and Badr (2022) developed the concept of "engaged journalism" as a type of digital alternative practice led by professional journalists with high-standards but also with the will to oppose hegemonic powers (be they private or public, economic or governmental). Here, we follow Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich's (2019) conceptualization of the digital native alternative media as a "proclaimed and/or (self)-proclaimed corrective" force opposed to what is perceived as the hegemonic media in a given system. This has clear epistemological implications, insomuch as alternative digital journalists reinterpret liberal journalistic ideals and sympathize with more subjective and advocacy roles (Atton and Hamilton 2008).

While most digital native alternative news sites in Latin America took off between 2010 and 2014 (de Macedo, Joyce and Harlow 2020), Cuba's low connectivity meant that such sites did not emerge there for a few more years. The 1992 Cuban Constitution [replaced in 2019] did not contemplate (and thus could not forbid) the existence of online media outlets.[2] Starting between 2014 and 2016, a young generation of recent journalism graduates took this loophole as a premise for establishing "alegal" digital native sites of their own. This took place within a context of 1) increased access to the Internet, 2) party calls for internal criticism and 3) the short-lived US-Cuba thaw that began in December 2014.

It is important to note that this emergent wave of digital journalism sites differed from the previous blogging/citizen journalism efforts led by activists, such as Yoani Sánchez's *Generation Y* (founded in 2007) or digital media projects established by Cuban exiles in the US, such as *CubaNet* (1994). Rather than a clearly oppositional tool, this new wave of digitally native independent media was pioneered by graduates in Journalism Studies from Cuban universities who were driven to explore the boundaries of freedom of expression through professional journalistic practices, reclaiming autonomy from the Cuban state (García Santamaría 2021). Media outlets founded

during this wave are far from homogeneous. Henken (2017) distinguishes between 1) digital dissident projects such as *14yMedio*, 2) digital millennials who ran both cultural magazines (*Vistar*) and hard news (*El Toque*) or narrative journalism sites (*El Estornudo*), 3) digital ecumenical projects associated with the Catholic Church (*CubaPosible*), 4) clearly oppositional projects founded in the "digital diaspora" (*CubaNet*) and 5) projects led by "critical revolutionaries" (*Periodismo de Barrio*) that initially did not conceive of themselves as dissidents (either out of caution or conviction).

While seen as part of Latin America's flourishing wave of digital native alternative media, this article uses the terms "independent journalism" and "independent media outlets" because they are the labels used by these Cuban journalists themselves. This is the term they use in their joint statements (Freedom House 2020) and a common keyword for self-presentation. For instance, *El Estornudo* defines itself as a "Cuban digital independent magazine of narrative journalism"[3]; *ADNCuba* presents itself as "an independent audiovisual magazine"[4], *El Toque* sees itself as an "independent multimedia platform"[5]. Therefore, our use of "independence" as a label stresses political autonomy in an authoritarian context where the state/party holds a legal media monopoly and where journalists and media projects operating outside that monopoly are systematically accused of serving as "mercenaries" of foreign, "counter-revolutionary" interests forcing them to work under great pressure.

In recent years, the Cuban government has been building a repressive legal apparatus aimed at controlling or outright silencing all independent voices (no matter how critical). Indeed, section 2.11 of Cuba's New Communication Policy and Article 55 of the 2019 Constitution both declare that mass media must be state or social property, explicitly banning private media. Decree Law 370 (2019) and 35 (2021) use the regulation of a digital society and cybersecurity as tools for restricting freedom of expression. Such legislation came with an intensification of repression, harassment, and defamatory campaigns (RSF 2020). This, together with a steep economic crisis, has led to massive emigration, including that of most of the independent journalists associated with these digitally native start-ups. Although Cuban independent media is digital and diasporic in nature (Henken 2021; Somohano-Fernández 2022), there is a need to further understand how these twin characteristics affect journalists' epistemic practices (Véliz Gutiérrez & Pérez 2022). In this context we ask:

RQ1: How does the digital and diasporic condition of Cuban independent journalists influence their access to knowledge?

RQ2: How do digital diasporic journalists redistribute epistemic status in their reporting, both for themselves and for marginalized voices?

RQ3: How do digital diasporic journalists navigate their autonomy in relation to political propaganda and activism?

3. Methodology

This article investigates the epistemological challenges of practicing digital diasporic Cuban journalism. The analysis draws on a body of 44 semi-structured interviews with Cuban independent journalists conducted between 2021 and 2023. Before asking

respondents to answer, they were given a short questionnaire in order to allow them to give informed consent and to collect basic demographic and professional data. Given that the research took place during the Covid-19 lockdown, interviews were conducted through semi-structured interviews. This was either done through video-conference or – especially in the case of Cuba-based journalists – *via* self-recorded audio responses using WhatsApp. No interviews took place in person. We anonymize all respondents for their protection (see Table 1).

The objective of the interviews was to investigate the factors that influence the epistemic practices of Cuban diasporic independent journalists. To achieve this, an interview guide was developed, consisting of open-ended questions inspired by Marttila's (2015) postfoundational discourse analysis. The primary focus of the interviews was to examine how the diasporic identity of Cuban digital independent journalists affects their access to knowledge. The initial set of questions aimed to explore the various elements that enable independent journalists to access knowledge in digital diasporic contexts (RQ1), as outlined in Marttila's concept of "destinators" (a). Additionally, the questions examined the role of various individuals or groups, referred to as "helpers" (b), who facilitate journalists' access to knowledge from abroad, including professional networks and connections within their home country. The second set of questions sought to understand how the (c) protagonists' professional identity as digital diasporic journalists influences their distribution of epistemic status (RQ2). These questions focused on the strategies employed by the interviewees to establish themselves as knowledgeable individuals and for finding and authorizing sources of information. Finally, the last set of questions explored the heteronomous forces that threaten journalists' perceived autonomy. These (d) opponents range from state repression to independent journalists' complex relationship with their propagandistic training and their occasional involvement in activism (RQ3).

From a postfoundational discourse analysis (PDA) perspective, the sampling must start with a spatio-temporal analysis of the situation and remain open to include further subject positions that emerge from the data (Marttila 2015). Therefore, the interviewees were selected through a combination of theoretical and snowball sampling techniques. We started the project by interviewing young independent journalists recently arrived in the diaspora. They account for 64% of our sample. Once the data reached saturation, we added two other groups that occupy distinct spatio-temporal and epistemological positions and, thus, provide us with new and complimentary insights. They are an older generation of journalists who went into exile in the twentieth century (7%) and journalists still reporting from Cuba at the moment of the interview (29%).[6] The sample of interviewees covers 17 Cuban digital native news sites (the first 17 outlets listed in Table 1). However, it is important to note that the interviewees have also collaborated with other media outlets not listed in Table 1, such as *Havana Times*, *Hypermedia Magazine, Alas Tensas*, or *Árbol Invertido*.[7]

All personal data from the interviewees has been anonymized. However, we have coded the interviewees to reveal important details about their epistemological position. R stands for respondent and has been randomly assigned to the interviewees; J identifies journalists and A, self-described activist-journalists. D represents the diaspora: T (traditional) and E (emergent). The emergent wave of independent media outlets refers to those that were created in the 2010s as access to the Internet

Table 1. Interviews' sample. M stands for male; F for female; a for activist and J for journalist.

Digital native media	R ($N=44$)	Gender	Place of residence	Professional definition
1. *14yMedio*	R37JED	M	USA	J
2. *ADNCuba*	R28AC	M	Cuba	A
	R39AED	M	Peru	A
	R3JED	F	Costa Rica	J
3. CiberCuba	R10ACG	F	Cuba-Spain	A
	R44JTD	M	USA	J
	R20JED	M	Spain	J
	R8JED	M	USA	J
4. *CubaNet*	R38JC	F	Cuba	J
	R15JED	M	USA	J
	R31JECG	F	Cuba-Argentina	J
	R2JED	F	Mexico	J
	R9JED	M	USA	J
	R32JED	M	USA	J
5. *Diario de Cuba*	R29AC	M	Cuba	A
	R41JCG	M	Cuba-Spain	J
	R30JED	M	Spain	J
	R27JED	F	Spain	J
	R1JCG	M	Cuba-USA	J
	R24AC	M	Cuba	A
6. *El Estornudo*	R18JED	M	USA	J
	R34JED	F	Spain-USA	J
	R12JED	F	USA	J
	R16JED	M	Mexico	J
	R40JCG	M	Cuba-Spain	J
7. *El Toque*	R7JED	M	USA	J
	R23JED	F	Spain	J
	R25JED	F	México	J
	R35JED	F	Mexico-USA	J
8. *La Hora de Cuba*	R21JC	M	Cuba	J
9. *Periodismo de Barrio*	R14JED	M	USA	J
	R33JED	M	Spain	J
	R36JCG	M	Cuba-USA	J
10. *Play-Off*	R4JED	M	USA	J
11. *Proyecto Inventario*	R19JED	M	Mexico	J
12. *Tremenda Nota*	R26JED	F	USA	J
	R6JED	M	USA	J
13. *La Joven Cuba*	R17JED	M	Brazil	J
14. *YucaByte*	R42JCG	F	Cuba-Germany	J
	R5JED	M	USA	J
15. *AM:PM Magazine*	R22JCG	M	Cuba-USA	J
16. *APIC/BPIC (Association of Independent Journalists of Cuba/ Bureau of the Independent Press of Cuba)*	R13ATD	M	USA	A
17. *OnCuba*: Foreign media outlet employing independent journalists	R11JED	F	USA	J
18. *Cuba Internacional*	R43JTD	F	Mexico	J

improved on the island. The letter C refers to journalists based in Cuba. Finally, G ("gone") is added to the interviewees who left Cuba in the two years following our interviews. For instance, R40JCG refers to respondent (R) number 40, who is a journalist (J) who was based in Cuba (C) at the moment of the interview but is now "gone" (G), joining the diaspora.

We have followed Marttila's (2015) three-step process for operationalizing post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA). PDA is "a theoretically informed approach to empirical research" that aims at unveiling the structure of a discourse (Marttila 2015, 29). From a Laclaunian post-structuralist perspective, the social world appears as constructed through discursive practices that attempt to fix meaning through processes of articulation that offer a partial fixity but are remain unstable and constantly threatened by alternative articulations (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007, 267). This articulation takes place around nodal points (Gaonkar 2012, 194). We have analyzed the discourses that digital diasporic journalists adhere to in their epistemic practices through a combination of ad-hoc open coding (emic) and a theory-driven (etic) approach based on three key phenomenal categories, corresponding to (1) nodal points, which are "points of reference" that represent the ideal identity of a given discourse and mark the boundaries between this discourse and (2) others that threaten its fulfillment (Marttila 2015). In PDA, this opposition is what confers (3) identity and allows social actors to occupy specific subject positions within a discourse. Marttila's PDA was visually represented by following Clarke et al.'s (2015) situational analysis (SA).

Marttila (2015, 150) recognizes the limitations of this operationlization and proposes a combination of PDA with other "non-text-centered methods," such as Clarke's situational analysis (SA). The advantage of using SA is that it provides the analytical means to map not only human and discursive elements, but also nonhuman, material, and symbolic factors that influence social actors' ability to articulate their subjectivities and practices. Here, we conducted the situational mapping through an iterative process in which we mapped the different contextual elements that influence our chosen situation, Cuban independent journalists' epistemic practices from the diaspora. These elements were first recorded through memo taking, then disorderly visualized in different maps, and finally refined through different analytical stages aimed at reconstructing the discursive and relational arrangements that emerge from the interviews.

In a first phase, we designed the analytical stages according to a PDA's theory-driven *co-construction* of the analytical strategies and research design, defining the spatio-temporal coordinates and operationalizing the theoretical framework. The outcome of the first phase has been represented in Figure 1 (situational map). In a second phase of *reconstruction*, we (a) compiled the corpus of the data. This was open to different phases of revision as we found new emerging findings. Then, we (b) analyzed the data with the aim of reconstructing the epistemological discourses interviewees adhered to, and how they were shaped by digital and diasporic ways of knowing. The results of these two processes are represented in Figure 2 (positional map), which illustrates the range of journalists' positions towards the diaspora as a site of knowledge and Figure 3 (social worlds/power arenas map), which represents the main collective actors and the professional discourses (arenas) they engage with. Finally, we identified the (c) material prerequisites of discourses, accessed through the sedimented roles and institutions that shape journalists' horizons of possibility. The outcome of this phase is represented in Figure 4. The third and final step consisted of a *collocation* of empirical findings, that is, identifying what is specific of this discursive constitution and what can be compared to similar cases in other contexts. This is explored in the discussion and the conclusion.

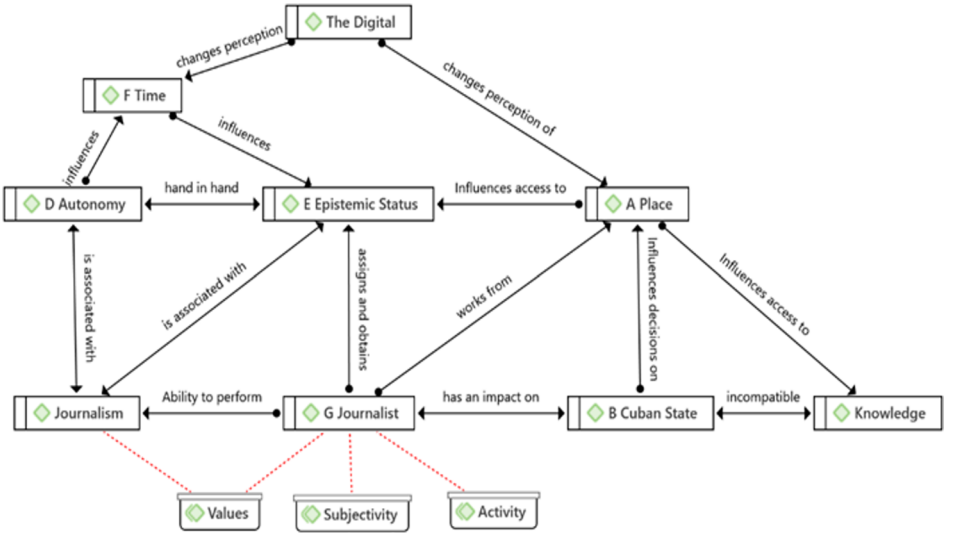

Figure 1. Situational map representing digital diasporic journalism in Cuba.

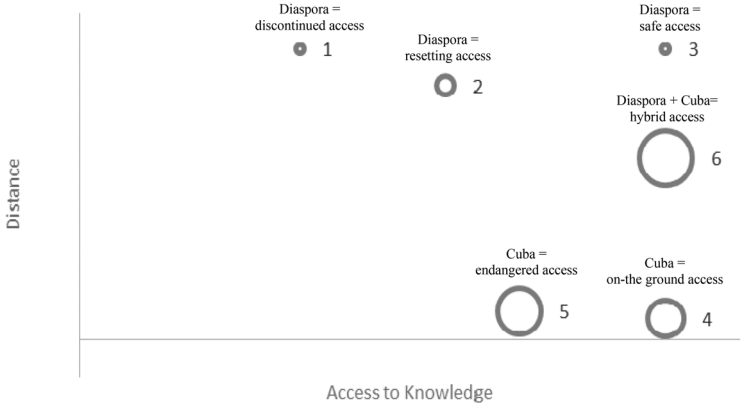

Figure 2. Positional map.

4. Findings

Digital diasporic journalists identify with distinct epistemological positions (towards journalism as a site of knowledge) and epistemic practices (actions that guide their truth-seeking ideals). The digital is an important contextual element that shapes independent journalists' identities. The data suggests that young diasporic journalists defend their digitally native media projects as different from those of the traditional diaspora, presenting them as more professional, balanced, and independent from either Cuban government or foreign hegemonic interests. The digital is also key in redistributing epistemic status, increasing diasporic journalists' authority but also that of previously marginalized voices. The importance of digital technologies in shaping diasporic journalism in Cuba can be seen in the following map:

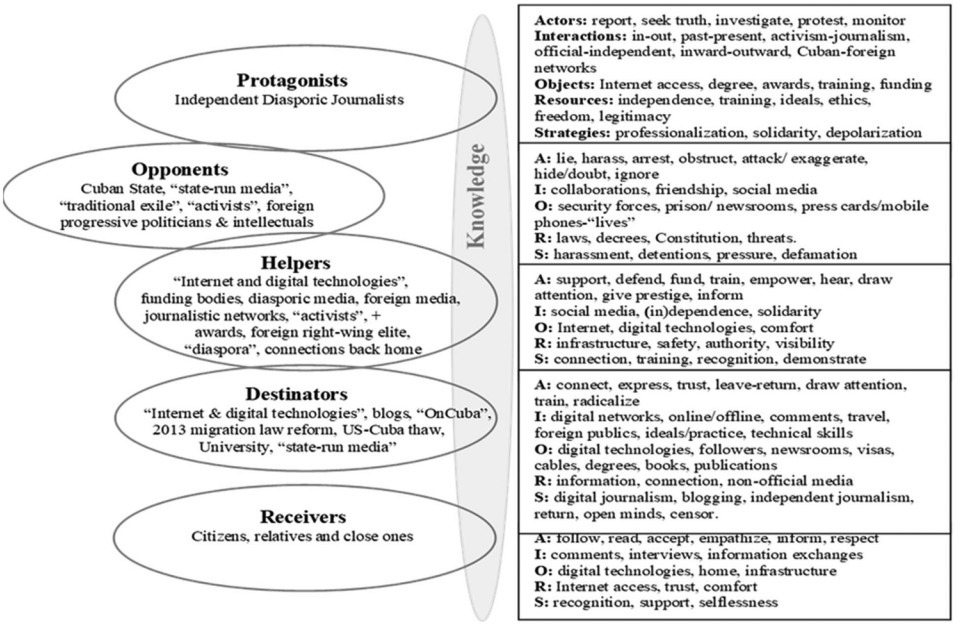

Figure 3. Typology of discursive identities that influence digital diasporic journalists' access to knowledge in Cuba. Own elaboration, based on Marttila's (2015) postfoundational discourse analysis (PDA).

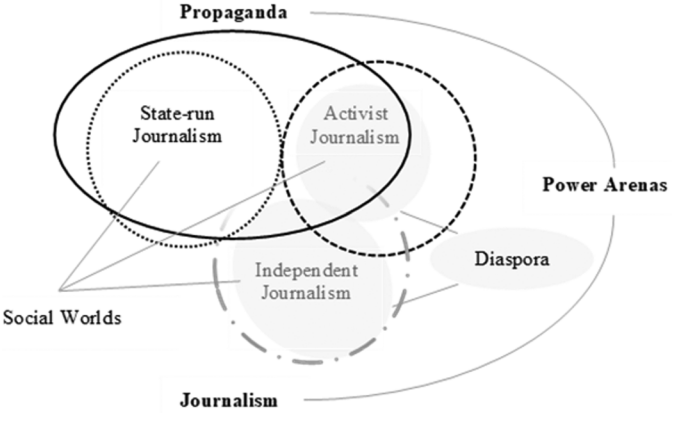

Figure 4. Digital social worlds/power arenas map.

4.1. Place

Place is a relevant yet unexplored epistemic category in journalism. Having part of their team in the diaspora is key for the survival of digital independent media outlets and allows them to evade repression and continue operating independently from state threats, but also poses significant challenges. The positional map below illustrates the interviewee's main positions toward the relationship between distance and their access to knowledge.[8] Intuitively, we could think that access to knowledge is

better on the ground. This is generally true. In the map, knowledge does accumulate in the lower right side of the graph: less distance, more access to knowledge. However, there are important nuances and caveats worth exploring.

From the data, we have identified six main subject positions. The first position (1) argues that distance makes it difficult to access knowledge. In this case, distance is not just geographically understood, but also as self-perceived. This position is associated with traditional Cuban exiles who left in the twentieth century and have never gone back, thus distancing themselves from citizens' everyday lives. As one of the interviewees puts it: "I would prefer to return with the full rights of citizenship to a Cuba of democratic guarantees without absurd restrictions" (R44JTD). However, contemporary independent journalists are no longer bound to an ethno-national "locus of enunciation" (Diniz de Figueiredo and Martinez 2021), whether in Cuba or abroad. Relocation, therefore, is seen as contingent and temporary, rather than permanent.

The second (2) position defends the possibility of reporting from the diaspora and still have decent access to knowledge. This is possible by periodically returning so that each new visit can act as a reset button. "I go back so I don't lose my compass," an interviewee states (R18JED). The possibility of traveling abroad and returning to Cuba is theoretical because journalists can be "regulated" by the state, preventing their return. Such regulations can last indefinitely. Therefore, diasporic journalists can feel that they left as emigrants, but the state subsequently converted them into exiles. "When you are afraid of returning to your homeland, you no longer feel that you emigrated but that you are exiled" (R35JDE), one of the independent journalists explained.

The third (3) position considers that distance can be compatible with greater knowledge because diasporic journalists have better access to digital technologies. This allows them to conduct in-depth investigative work in a calm context of safety. This is because those (5) on the ground suffer state-led harassment, damaging their psychological wellbeing, personal safety, and material comfort. Harassment also has negative epistemic consequences for journalism practice. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

> Journalists without freedom of movement nor access have their work capacity very limited. When a journalist leaves, however, they have all the sources of information and communication within reach and can see Cuba's reality to an extent that is impossible from within (R29AC).

The data shows two intermediate positions that value proximity most. Some reporters argue that (4) being in the field gives them the best access to witnesses and first-hand sources. Those who left have lost that possibility, and the knowledge that organically stems from it. A last group of interviewees defends a (6) hybrid position in which truth-seeking opportunities improve through the ongoing collaboration between journalists in the field and journalists abroad. This can be rewarding, since "journalists who live abroad see things that those who are inside don't, and vice versa" (R42JCG). The problem is that massive emigration is threatening digital independent media outlets, some of which are left with few or no journalists in Cuba. Without journalists on the ground, those reporting from abroad have to navigate "in a world in which our only sources of information are citizens without journalistic

training, without neutrality, based on what they offer on social media," posing great epistemic problems (2R1JED).

4.2. Epistemic Status

The interviews reveal a second epistemic cleavage related to digital diasporic journalists' redistribution of epistemic status. First, this has to do with journalists' own authority. Professionalism is perceived as the main element that confers authority on digital diasporic journalists. Diasporic journalists' hybrid epistemologies are inspired by Western normative ideals, such as watchdog journalism, objectivity, and fact-checking, as well as Cuban contextual ideals and practices, such as journalists' rejection of both propaganda and activism, and their civic vocation, that is, their commitment to properly informing their readers back home so they can make informed political choices (Somohano-Fernández 2022).

The main self-perceived obstacle in journalists' pursuit of professionalism is the Cuban state, which exercises constant harassment that pushes journalists into exile and then questions their authority when they report from abroad. State threats to digital safety put pressure on independent journalists after they emigrate, attempting to discredit both their authority and their autonomy, and thus questioning their epistemic status. This can be seen in the following excerpt: "I have been threatened online. They have told me that I cannot return to Cuba. I've been defamed, as well. In [my hometown] they've said everything about me, from labeling me a 'mercenary' to claiming that I support an invasion of Cuba" (R19JED).

The unique position of diasporic journalists means that they depend on interactions with assistants to advance their epistemic practices. Such assistants support their ideals and equip them with a relatively stable infrastructure. Foreign assistants and supporters confer greater authority to digital diasporic journalists' reporting. Journalists obtain this authority by traveling to international meetings, whether workshops, journalistic conferences and festivals, book promotions, or even awards ceremonies. A journalist admits that "the possibility of participating in foreign events, of making a piece of work that has the requirements to win international contests" confers prestige and is a great source of professional satisfaction (R7JED). The interviewees conceive of these meetings as privileged spaces of socialization with relevant inward and outward-looking epistemic consequences.

Diasporic journalists are able to achieve greater international visibility and authority, even if those reporting from the island have greater access to knowledge. This comes with a notable power inequality as is reflected in the following excerpt: "Being in Cuba implies greater sacrifices, much greater risks, even if people who are in Cuba are often worse paid and receive less recognition" (R34JED). Being abroad is a privilege: "Good journalism does not understand borders, even if I recognize that it is not the same to write a report at the foot of the gallows as under the shade of a coconut tree, with a mojito in my hand" (R26JED). Another journalist who recently left the island explained it this way:

> It is not the same to report on what happens in Cuba being here than from the outside. It is not the same because the sources of the stories are flesh and blood and not a voice

> or an image on a screen. It is not the same because the state repression happens in Cuba and not abroad, because here they can put you in prison, they can confiscate your property. In order to report on [Cuba], you have to be here. The rest is opinion, information, activism… something else. Which are also valid but do not have the same journalistic value (R40JCG).

A second relevant element has to do with independent journalists' redistribution of others' epistemic status: who is seen as knowledgeable and authoritative. The redistribution can be either purposive or accidental. Our interviewees report having a public service vocation. A common ideal is that of giving voice to citizens (rather than bureaucrats), and especially the weak or those marginalized by the state-run media because of their sexual orientation, race, or ideology. Therefore, independent journalists can purposely turn those citizens into authorized knowers. "The media have always been on the side of power. These media are here to serve the people" (R12JED).

The redistribution of epistemic status can also be accidental, a result of contextual factors. Independent journalists are denied access to official sources on the island. Furthermore, given their geographic location outside the boundaries of the country, diasporic independent journalists lack access to first-hand sources. Thus, digital technologies become key aids for such journalists in obtaining and fact-checking information *via* social media and messaging apps. However, the relevance they give to citizen sources is a byproduct of both state censorship and Internet access, rather than a deliberate epistemic act.

4.3. Autonomy

The autonomy of diasporic journalists working in the digitally native media is the third epistemic cleavage that appears in the interviews. Autonomy is a relevant epistemic category since journalists are able to produce authoritative knowledge as long as they are perceived as autonomous from political and vested interests. This task is especially challenging for young diasporic journalists who seek to assert their independence from the propaganda of both the Cuban state and that of the US-based hardline diaspora.

This article understands autonomy as a gradual process of perception that is culturally bounded. In the Cuban context, there have been two clear milestones that have increased journalists' perceived autonomy. The first milestone responds to what we call the "organizational turn": the founding of digitally native journalistic projects in the early 2010s, producing a rupture with the state-owned media. Founding independent journalistic startups marked a breakthrough in journalists' organizational autonomy in terms of ownership, management routines, editorial work, and funding.

During this organizational turn, journalists' justification of their autonomy came through discourses of professionalization. In this phase, the interviews reveal that journalists' appeals to professionalism and independence became nodal points that authorized digital journalists in their production of reliable knowledge about Cuban society. As one of the interviewees explained, the only weapon independent journalists have is the quality of their work: "we just want to do journalism, we are not interested in politics" (R14JED). This means that citizens could access knowledge about topics

that were previously silenced by the state. They could hear new voices. However, this came mostly in the form of moderate procedural criticism, rather than frontal opposition to the government.

After a period of uncomfortable tolerance, the Cuban state intensified its repression towards the end of the 2010–2020 period, unleashing a second milestone: the nearly complete transnationalization of Cuban digital independent media due to journalists' emigration/forced exile. The diasporic condition of journalists favored a second turn, this time a decidedly political one. While some interviewees started voicing their political views while in Cuba, joining the diaspora made it easier since they no longer had to fear direct repression. As one of the interviewees puts it, "I admire those who did, but I did not dare to cross that line until I left the country" (R39AED).

Cuban independent journalists realized that politicization was inescapable, since the state had already positioned them as "mercenaries" sold to foreign interests. "Once you narrate something and offer a news frame that differs from that of the official media, you become a dissident" (R28AED). This shift had important consequences for journalists' self-identification.

The social worlds/power arenas map below illustrates the interviewees' understanding of the worlds of digital journalism in Cuba (state-run, activist, and independent), as well as their position towards the two main arenas they fight over: professional journalism versus propaganda. Rather than clear-cut, the map illustrates how digital diasporic journalism often intersects and overlaps with activism.

The political turn changed how digital diasporic journalists constructed their relationship with a previously uncomfortable field, that of activism. Joining the diaspora allowed journalists to share spaces with activists (in training sessions, for instance), meeting them in person and reassessing their authority. As a journalist recognizes, "they denounced rights violations and you thought it was fake, and then you start realizing that it is true" (R33JED). While it is rare to come across professional journalists who identify a priori with labels such as activist or dissident, the interviewees report that the Cuban government pushed them to the limit of the political spectrum and, by doing so, obliged them to choose sides. "It's like I was forced into activism, right? Being a victim of all this repression, I felt obliged to protest as well" (R38JC).

When the interviewees do acknowledge a dual journalist-activist identity, they position themselves as part of the anti-Castro dissidence. For instance, one of our interviewees noted that he considers himself to be a political opponent ("*un opositor*") who does journalism as a way of denouncing the dictatorship and giving voice to its victims (R29AC). In a similar vein, another interviewee practices "journalism as a method of struggle to overthrow the dictatorship" (R10ACG).

While the interviewees sympathized with certain social causes and fought for them, they also believe activism cannot come at the cost of journalistic professional autonomy. As this interviewee puts it, "[t]he differences between the independent media, the opposition, and activism should be journalism. Full stop" (R23JED). This is in line with previous work that sees journalistic autonomy as a key element that sets professional journalism apart from other nearby fields (Lauk and Harro-Loit 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

Journalism is one of our main sources of knowledge in contemporary societies (Zelizer 2009). However, few works have explored how digital diasporic journalism changes our ways of accessing knowledge in countries often ravaged by conflict or authoritarianism (Oyeleye 2017). This article has explored how the digital and diasporic condition of Cuban independent journalists influences their self-perceived epistemic practices, and with what consequences.

While diasporic journalists appropriate digital technologies to compensate for their geographic remove (Tufekci 2014), the diaspora facilitates new hybrid epistemic practices that have remained unexplored (Véliz Gutiérrez & Pérez 2022). In this context, analyzing digital diasporic practices helps us understand the epistemological boundaries of journalism: who qualifies as a journalist in an increasingly porous field and what practices of accessing and producing knowledge are acceptable.

This article has identified journalists' place of reporting as a key epistemological category that determines their ability to access knowledge and to produce quality journalism (RQ1). Journalists working in the global south often face significant challenges in the form of anti-press repression and violence. In this context, the expectation that journalists pursue Western ideals (Enghel and Becerra 2018) can come at a high personal cost, but not only that. Practicing journalism under threat can have negative epistemological consequences. Journalists' exposure to state repression negatively affects their ability to access information, but also creates a chaotic and stressful working environment that can lead to self-censorship and poor verification practices.

When examining place as a key epistemological cleavage, the interviews suggest that diasporic journalists' (dis)place(ment) is more porous and undetermined than expected (RQ1). This is in line with post-colonial and feminist approaches that question the traditional understanding of the diaspora as marking a fixed place and single identity (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022; Leurs 2022). This porosity means that the diaspora is no longer a set place of no-return, as was the case for the traditional Cuban exile. The interviewees tend to see their diasporic condition as contextual and temporary. In the Cuban case, digital technologies facilitate a constant collaboration between diasporic journalists and island-based reporters that maximizes truth-seeking opportunities.

The data suggests that the diaspora is a marker of unequal status, influencing journalists' self-perceived and externally granted authority (RQ2). The great power imbalances between those reporting from Cuba and those in the diaspora make being abroad a personal and professional privilege (even if it is a less than ideal vantage point from a reporting perspective). While those in Cuba are under greater pressure and endure constant threats, they also endure less prestige and international recognition. Both state repression and power imbalances have led to a massive emigration of journalists, with many of the digital news sites included in this study having few or no reporters left on the island. This poses a significant challenge to diasporic journalists' access to first-hand knowledge.

The co-dependence between journalists abroad and at home gives a relational nature to diasporic journalism that comes with a clear responsibility: those abroad are aware of their need to support and advocate for those on the ground because they are key to quality reporting, and their professional reputation depends upon

them. This relational and transnational nature is linked to diasporic journalists' "brokerage" role, connecting voices inside and outside the country (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). Furthermore, diasporic journalists also engage in the mentoring and capacity-building of those on the ground as a way of redistributing power and maximizing access to knowledge (Yousuf and Taylor 2017). This is in line with what Porlezza and Arafat (2021) consider to be the "defender" and "trainer" role of diasporic journalists.

Rather than feeding into discourses of Cuban exceptionality, this article contextualizes Cuban digital diasporic practices of journalism within contemporary trends of Latin American digital native alternative media. In terms of autonomy (RQ3), research on the global south has consistently found journalists' commitment to advocacy (Mellado 2020), subjective, and social-change roles (Hanitzsch 2019). Cuban journalists' emigration facilitated a political turn that had important epistemological implications insomuch as they were able to reinterpret normative ideals and come to terms with more subjective, interpretative, and advocacy roles, feeling comfortable with becoming social change agents themselves (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018).

However, the Cuban case fits better with Martín-Barbero's (1993) work on hybridity and Harlow's (2021) notion of *mestizaje*. In Cuba, as in Latin America, independent digital news sites do not clearly fit within Western notions of either the alternative or the mainstream media. While the first wave of dissident independent media in Cuba did fit more comfortably with the kind of amateur, activist, and citizen journalism that is expected from alternative news sites, the emergent wave of digital independent journalists remains committed to social change, yet puts professionalism before activism (SembraMedia 2021). Thus, we need to understand it as part of the "engaged journalism" trend in Latin America, led by professional journalists who see themselves as autonomous from heteronomous forces and with high professional standards (Medeiros and Badr 2022).

As Cubans like to say, none of this is easy ("*no es fácil*") to explain or fully understand. However, the Cuban case reveals that joining the Cuban diaspora does not mean giving up on doing epistemically legitimate journalism. Indeed, on might say that it is both the best and worst of times for independent Cuban journalism since Cuba's current diasporic digital journalism movement seems to have grown stronger and more effective even as greater numbers of journalists have left the island (Henken, 2022). In fact, our interviews reveal that epistemological hybridity and collaboration between those home and abroad remain key elements for maximizing truth-seeking opportunities.

Notes

1. The term "independent" media outlets refers to projects independent from the Communist Party's (CCP) media structure and, thus, illegal in Cuba. Among those, there is an emergent wave that corresponds to the projects founded between 2014 and 2016 in the light of the US-Cuba thaw. While contested, the term "independent" is used by journalists themselves in our interviews and in their various public statements.
2. However, article 55 of the current 2019 Constitution states no media outlets, in whatever format, can be private property, explicitly making digital independent media illegal.
3. https://revistaelestornudo.com/el-estornudo-principios-valores-declaracion/.
4. https://adncuba.com/acerca-de-adn-cuba.
5. https://eltoque.com/sobre-nosotros.

6. One indicator of the pressure faced by journalists working from Cuba is the fact that in the nearly three years since our interviews began in spring 2021, only 5 remain in the island while 8 left after being interviewed.
7. *SembraMedia* reports 24 independent media outlets that fulfill its criteria. However, it does not include larger organizations such as *CubaNet* or *Diario de las Américas*, nor recent projects such as *Proyecto Inventario* or *YucaByte*. See https://directorio.sembramedia.org/?page=3&country=7&order=-weight.
8. Note that distance is not calculated in kilometers or miles. Distance is instead understood as journalists' ability to be in Cuba (to stay, to go back, to feel at home). The size of each circle in our positional map illustrates the level of the interviewee's agreement with each position.

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