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Re-reading Cuba in London: Media and Identity in the Cuban Diaspora

Abstract

This article examines issues of identity formation within Cubans in London and how news media figure in this process. It is argued that news media consumption plays a pivotal role in constructing knowledge about Cuba and how this new knowledge contributes to form notions of identity and nation amongst the emigrants. In diaspora, news media are used to validate a relationship with the emigrants' past and future. Past events are reviewed by a critical use of media, by acknowledging the potential bias of homeland media and the way Cuba was portrayed in the host country. I discuss how media influence the migrants' future, because notions of nation and culture gained from media access actively intervene in the emigrants' subject construction. The construction of knowledge through media represents an ongoing process that also influences identity formation. Accessed media reports can be internalised through renovated reading practices, especially for those who lacked the habit in the homeland, to re-define notions of belonging and claims of loyalties to Cuba. The article is based on a series of qualitative interviewing. From the data analysis, narratives of belonging and self-consciousness suggest that notions of nation and national identity are constructed differently in the Cuban diaspora than in the homeland.

Key words: Cuban diaspora, identity, media, ethnic groups, media consumption

Rezumat

Acest articol examinează problematica formării identității la cubanezii din Londra și felul în care contribuie știrile din presă la acest proces. Susținem că în procesul de construire a cunoașterii despre Cuba consumul de știri joacă un rol central; de asemenea această nouă cunoaștere contribuie la construirea noțiunilor de identitate și națiune în rândul migranților. În diaspora, presa este folosită pentru a valida relația cu trecutul și viitorul migranților. Uzajul critic al media duce la o reinterpretare a evenimentelor din trecut și, implicit, recunoașterea caracterului părintor atât al presei din țara de origine, cât și al reprezentării Cubei în țara gazdă. Discutăm faptul că noțiunile de națiune și cultură mediate de presă intervin activ în construcția subiectului de către migranți. Construirea cunoașterii prin media reprezintă un proces continuu care influențează și formarea identității. Știrile pot fi internalizate prin noi practici de lectură, mai ales la cei care nu aveau acest obicei în țara de origine, și ajung astfel să redefinească noțiunile de apartenență și loialitate față de Cuba. Articolul se bazează pe o serie de 40 de interviuri. Analizând datele, narațiunile despre apartenență și cunoaștere de sine relevă că noțiunile de națiune și identitate națională sunt construite diferit în diaspora cubaneză față de țara de origine.

Cuvinte-cheie: Diaspora cubaneză, identitate, media, grup etnic, consum mediativ

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1. Introduction

Emigration has been a regular occurrence in the history of the Cuban Revolution, but patterns changed after the crisis of the 1990s¹. Cubans emigrants increasingly favoured non-traditional destinations, for example, European countries. Academic research on these new diasporas still remains sporadic. The emergence of this specific émigré group coincided with the “globalisation of migration” (Castles & Miller, 1993, p. 8) and increasing academic interest in transnational communities. However, this group also appeared in the specific historical circumstances of the latest developments in the homeland. The Cuba they left differed from the country that many of those who left earlier for the United States experienced and knew. Their arrival in the United Kingdom took place after they had spent most of their lives in revolutionary Cuba, during critical periods when both the revolutionary model of Cuban society and ideas of nation, culture and cultural identity were questioned as part of the national discourse.

This article challenges a limited portrayal of the Cuban diaspora as a politically motivated group located in the United States². The group in London is different by nature, relatively small compared to its U.S. counterpart and not as visible or organised. To illustrate the particularities of this émigré group, I have selected the topics of media. After 1959 the Cuban media came under the control of the government: it regulated media contents following the propaganda model and limited the dissemination of foreign media. During fifty years of revolutionary rule, Cubans have become accustomed to an official version of national history and to a sense of identity that has prioritised the political nuances of the term. In diaspora, this version can be contested or even rejected.

The article is based on in-depth interviews with forty Cuban-Londoners, twenty males and twenty females, conducted in London during 2006-2007. The migration of Cubans to Britain is not an organised process, and the emigrants I interviewed arrived following different routes. The majority (28 out of 40) came after marriage to British citizens. As for the rest of my sample, some had relatives who settled in London in the early 1960s. Others came as students, academics and professionals and overstayed their visas. Two participants arrived after having initially settled in other E.U. countries. Such a varied picture makes it difficult to claim that members of the Cuban-Londoners represented a particular group of individuals in terms of status, class, gender or region of origin. It was more the case that the group appeared naturally, without a centre that promoted links to the homeland or gathered the group together. This invisibility remains a key characteristic of these expatriates, which impeded knowing the size of its population. Census data shows that there were 536 Cubans in London in 2001 (DMA, 2005), but some participants quoting lists from the Cuban Embassy, which I could not access, estimated the total number of Cubans in Britain to be 2000.

After a discussion of recent academic studies on media and identity, the article discusses how participants read and use news sources to seek information about their homeland. It then moves on to explore personal strategies of making meanings about Cuba. Participants acknowledge gaining an enhanced knowledge about the homeland, which influences their notions of identity by challenging previously learned conceptions about national history and the importance of nation in the homeland context.

2. Media and identity: theoretical approaches

Media used to produce a particular cultural identity or to promote community formation in the diasporic context become important in a world dominated by the impact of information technologies. The impact of media is analysed in this article through the concept of representation. According to Stuart Hall, representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any signifying system that deploys signs) to produce meanings (1997, p. 61).

Media in diaspora are responsible for representations of the emigrants' homeland, their space in the host country and their own way to identify themselves. Media are also part of the transnational links that are exchanged between *here* and *there* and can be used to strengthen or weaken loyalties to the homeland, the host country or allegiances that exceed geopolitical entities. New information technologies have contributed to the study of media as a transnational link. The advent of satellite television and the Internet has been particularly important. Both clearly exemplify what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls the mediascape, one of the five dimensions he attributes to cultural flows in globalisation. He argues that mediascapes relate to the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information, as well as to the images of the world created by these electronic media (p. 35). Satellite television and the Internet in diasporic communities not only facilitate access to and consumption of homeland content but also create diasporic content either by the production of programmes and films or by the establishment of online media that may be accessed worldwide.

Diasporic media have been used to build a sense of identity within expatriate communities (Karim, 2003). As Karim H. Karim notes, diasporas re-create home by instilling vast resonance into the spaces they occupy, but the milieus that diasporas seek to form are not constrained by the borders of nation-states (2003, p. 10). Media's representation of home sometimes differs from the institutionalised version of home that the official homeland media portray.

Studies of diaspora television highlight important issues, for example, that migrants may have interests other than sustaining their identity and culture when they access homeland media and that they appear to consume more television news from their countries of origin than from their host countries (Christiansen, 2004, p. 185). However, satellite television associated with diasporic communities is not a widespread phenomenon because not all immigrants can access television broadcasts from their country of origin or have programmes made specifically for the diaspora. Perhaps this explains why the majority of diasporic media studies have focused on the Internet. Online media can be used broadly in the diasporic context when migrants overcome the technology gap. Hong Qiu's (2003) research on the online magazines created by Chinese students in the United States shows how they provide evidence for the formation of a virtual diasporic community (2003, p. 153). Lisa Tsaliki, analysing websites created by expatriate Greeks, argues that the computer-mediated community is constructed in the same way that Benedict Anderson's (1991) imagined community becomes a nation. In addition, she notes that computer-mediated communication happens to be the language of the "nation as a metaphor and cyberspace the location of the national narrative" (2003, p. 174). The nation as a virtual community favours the negotiation of national identity because emigrants tend to debate online what constitutes nation and national identity. Online diasporic communities can be seen as a suitable space to display and contest notions of similarities between the members of the diaspora. Migrants may share a common homeland but reside in

different host countries; therefore, interactions may relate to homeland, host country and virtual community.

Victoria Bernal (2006) for instance, describes the role of online media in promoting links within the Eritrean diaspora. She analyses the Internet as a transnational public sphere where Eritreans produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity (p. 162). The diasporic online community contributes to the development of a notion of identity based on the contributions of online users, which gains particular importance, given that Eritrea emerged as an independent nation as recently as 1993.

Angel Adams Parham (2005) defines three different types of Internet-mediated publics: representational, network and vertical. The main goal of the representational public is “literally to represent the country and/or the culture of the diaspora” (p. 353). Websites and online forums are viewed as spaces that showcase the homeland culture and history. Network publics are aimed at exchanging information and communication with the purpose of creating group opinions and setting agendas (p. 356). In this group, the Internet provides the effect of interactivity. Adams Parham notes, like Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins (2003), that the online audience generally replicates pre-Internet media cultures, but she associates this trend with the representational public. By contrast, network publics are a novelty, facilitating diasporic citizens to make sense and act upon distant events by engaging in critical discussion and to provide a platform for representatives of the state to actively or indirectly consider what is being discussed in cyberspace (2005, p. 357). The third public is vertical because the members are organized “through a formal structure that spans the full continuum of interaction from the ‘top’ in cyberspace to the ‘bottom’ in specific geographic spaces” (p. 366). To this audience, the discussions and agenda setting are not limited to the Internet because members of this audience equally try to implement their aims off-line.

The use of online media, as that of satellite television by diasporic communities, has also been examined through ethnographic methods. As Kenneth Thompson states, such methods have revealed that the home culture of ethnic minorities has not always been “the site where cultural traditions are maintained and assimilation to national/global culture is resisted” (2002, p. 409). The picture is more complex than that and highlights the importance of examining migrants’ use of media not only as a question of access and consumption but also as a matter of social interactions.

Thompson defines the online community as the space where no one is in control, there is no ideological closure and, as a result, “no grand narratives of the nation emerge” (2002, p. 411). This argument suggests that cyberspace has a particular impact in discourses about the nation. The homeland is enhanced or limited, depending on the way diaspora has been lived, assumed, conceptualised and expressed by diasporic individuals. However, as Thompson (2002) also notes, new communication technologies such as the Internet are also employed to express and create public individuals’ sense of self, which draws attention to the concern Aksoy and Robins (2003) express regarding the use of satellite television among diasporic audiences: just because migrants use homeland media does not mean that they are connecting to their homeland culture. Hence, these media also facilitate the construction of a notion of identity that is de-centred and post-modern in Hall’s sense (1992).

3. Media and identity in revolutionary Cuba

The rules of media and cultural production in revolutionary Cuba were defined by Fidel Castro in his famous 1961 speech *Palabras a los intelectuales* (Words to Intellectuals): “What are the rights of writers and artists, whether they are revolutionary or non-revolutionary? Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, no rights at all” (Castro Ruz, 1961b, cited García Luis, 2008, p. 117). The phrase became a template for the cultural policy of the Cuban Revolution, a mandate that Cuban media was also compelled to follow. Castro’s speech was motivated ironically by a media product: the documentary *PM* by Sabá Cabrera Infante, which depicted nightlife in the vicinity of Havana’s port. After the speech it became clear that *certain* representations of Cuban society would not be tolerated.

Cuban media have been instrumental in promoting constructed versions of national identity in hand with the government view. Mass media became a vital tool for broadcasting in epic terms the re-birth of the nation, following an ideological mission commanded by the Cuban government. However, this profusion of images and texts always followed a selective approach: only what was relevant in terms of ideological purposes was transmitted and consequently incorporated. Cristina Venegas (2010) considers that through television Fidel Castro forged a strong association between himself and the party ideology. She argues that he became a constant presence in Cuban homes, instructing audiences on important matters of policy, ideology and goals (p. 82). Although this may seem exceptionally Cuban, recent research suggests that media play a decisive role in creating collective versions of national history and culture elsewhere.

Analysing the role of satellite television in Algeria, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (2006) has argued that national television promoted a constructed version of Algerian history through a process of mythologization and fossilisation. She states that constructions of history have obliterated the multiplicity of memories, which in turn has led to the recognition solely of the role of the National Liberation Front in the anti-colonial struggle (p. 198). So, Algerians’ use of satellite television constitutes a rejection of the mediated version of national history portrayed by the official media in terms of veracity and authenticity. According to Hadj-Moussa, Algerians rejected that televised history because it neither represented the truth nor reflected what her informants called “Algerian” culture (p. 198). Following her argument, it seems plausible to claim that alternative media, such as those that appear on satellite television, easily challenges constructed notions of nationhood and culture.

In the early 1990s, with the advent of international tourism, Cubans briefly enjoyed the benefits of transnationalism in terms of mass media. Satellite television became available in tourist hotels and villas and the signal was subsequently hijacked and re-distributed illegally to some Cuban households. National television and the press remained tightly controlled by Party officials, but Cubans increasingly turned to other versions of their reality now available though illegal means, sometimes even with a homemade device: a *criolla* satellite dish. Entertainment-based programmes such as musical shows and Mexican, Colombian or Brazilian soap operas ranked high in the favourite products consumed through these new media channels. Video banks opened throughout the country, where Cubans could rent pirated copies of Hollywood films, Discovery Channel documentaries and Latin American *telenovelas*. These illegally obtained media products were not readily available because only those with access to U.S. dollars or those who lived in the vicinity of tourist areas where the signal could be re-

ceived could enjoy alternative television. In other parts of the island, official media continued to be the only option.

It has been my argument that diaspora is a good setting in which to analyse the process of confronting the multiplicity of versions of the homeland. While Cuba may be far from being a prime-time subject for British media, Cubans in London are exposed to a varied mediascape (Appadurai, 1996) from which they can choose. Online media has put in the public domain debates that otherwise would have become irrelevant or unknown (Venegas, 2010, p. 56). Nowadays, the Cuban blogosphere, for example, typifies comparisons between what is said in the official media with what is not said through those very media channels. News websites, such as *Cubaencuentro*³ and its recent spin-off *Diario de Cuba*⁴, and blogs such as *Penúltimos días*⁵ regularly dispute the official media versions of a certain event by providing other foreign media accounts or by adding their own analysis.

Despite globalisation and its influences, Cuban mass media is still characterised by the propaganda model. While commercial television and other entertainment-based media were incorporated in the 1990s, recently new channels have been launched to keep audiences relying on what they are shown on their television sets. Television displaced other media and sources of entertainment during the Special Period and in the following years, regaining its status as a source of education and political mobilisation. Programmes such as *Universidad para todos* (University for all) were broadcast to teach subjects ranging from the sciences to foreign languages. During the Elián González affair, and for some years after his return to Cuba in 2000, *Tribunas abiertas* (Open Tribunes) were regularly broadcast live on national television together with another programme of information and comment, *Mesa redonda* (Round table), both of which resulted in a saturation of the political message for a generation that decided to leave the country and settle elsewhere.

Media responses to the structural changes in Cuban society in the 1990s were largely non-existent, except for publications such as *Temas* and *La Gaceta de Cuba*, which contributed with critical views about emerging social phenomena (increasing poverty, prostitution, illegal emigration). The crisis radically changed the perception Cubans had of their country, constituting an example of what can be termed a crisis of representation. It refers not so much to the way the crisis affected the idea of the nation portrayed by the media, but to how coherent and *real* the previous notions had been. However, media policy makers were still reluctant to change, especially if those changes had ideological implications. Sujatha Fernandes (2005) used the case of *Magín*, a feminist network that emerged in the aftermath of the crisis with the aim of changing the way women were traditionally portrayed in the national media. *Magín* members tried to promote gender awareness in the media and challenge negative stereotypes (p. 441), but their activism was deemed a challenge to the authority of other organizations such as the FMC and the Cuban Journalists Union. In the end, *Magín*, like many other NGOs that appeared in the early 1990s, did not survive the government crackdown in 1996.

4. Interview design

My set of open-ended questions was designed to target the main topics of my research. The idea was to stimulate a useful discussion of the notion of identity of my participants, starting by their personal views of identity. I started with a set of general questions about London and why the city was chosen as a destination. This set was aimed mainly at identi-

ifying the reasons behind the migratory experience and the relevance of opting for Britain over other places in the world with expatriate communities (the United States, Spain, Mexico, etc.). In the same session, I included other questions to explore the main preconceptions about London and the United Kingdom my participants had before coming and if they had known about the existence of Cuban emigrants in the city.

Although I asked in more detail about identity in the follow-up session, this first set of questions allowed me to establish rapport with my interviewees. I detailed the participants' views on the city to begin with, not only because London would be the setting of the interview, but also because it was the easiest topic with which to start. I asked the participants about their willingness to identify themselves always as Cubans, as well as about whether there had been any occasions that prevented them from stating their nationality.

The next set of questions addressed the participants' notions of identity, nation and culture. The questions were formulated in a simple way to allow the interviewees to respond in their own words and to assess their understanding of these topics, as well as the importance these notions had in their everyday life. Other questions focused on their notions of belonging.

The interview continued with questions about the type of media the migrants accessed. I was interested in the differences they find between consuming what was published in the Cuban press and what was published about Cuba in the host country and/or in other global media. With these questions, I examined their pattern of news media consumption, but also their experiences in gathering news about Cuba that could be compared to previous learned reading practices they had in the homeland. These questions favoured a discussion about the way "nation" was constructed according to media discourses, which seemed vital to their notion of identity.

While exploring the issue of media, I asked about their personal strategies to access media, whether they involve reading Cuban official media, Cuban expatriate publications or exclusively international reports about the country. With this segment of the interview, I looked at the type of media accessed to construct their knowledge about the country. The theoretical assumptions relate to the discourse about the nation shaped by the media they now access and to comparisons between the interviewees' patterns of consumption while they were in Cuba and now in diaspora.

All the interviews were structured and coded using MAXQDA software. This tool helped to segment the work, explore the data and provide a "code and retrieve" functionality in the database. Using semi-structured interviews also helped in structuring the data to be used by the software, which permitted an efficient use of the coding tools and the further retrieval of codes.

In terms of coding, the deductive approach prevailed, based on the theoretical framework and the areas of the research I wanted to address during the sessions. The coding system was fairly hierarchical but could be represented as a conceptual map, which included themes, topics, concepts and ideas expressed by the participants; and a more practical map, which dealt with strategies, behaviour and practices. I used the software's colour-coding tool, which assigned different colours to selected segments of text.

Concepts such as the participants' metaphors for identity, nation and personal understandings of Cubanness and being Cuban were coded as meanings. These were both descriptive and interpretative codes that were used to explain and discuss the interviewees' notions of the main topics of the research. They were "descriptive" because at first they offered a summary description of the different concepts, but the explanation was rarely based on specific tenets. Participants' explanations of identity, nation, and national identity, generally suggested more

contextual considerations of these topics, which were crucial to discuss their understandings of identity and nation in diaspora. Other codes focused on behaviour, for example, expressions denoting the pride of identity, the incidence of humour, and idioms and words that could be classified as typically Cuban. These optimised the subsequent retrieval of transcripts outlining the display of their Cubanness, which contributed to the discussion of findings.

5. Reading about Cuba in London

When asked about the kind of news media they accessed, respondents listed a group of 37 main sources. The majority of them (18) belong to the British media, although other international media are regularly consulted, mainly through the Internet. The World Wide Web is the preferred platform when looking for information, but some of my participants revealed that they watched British television (BBC, ITV and Skynews) and listened to British radio. Although the results were divided by males and females, the gender breakdown was not particularly pronounced in the selection of media sources, except in the case of British media, whose audience and readership were largely dominated by women.

It is difficult to claim that the patterns of consumption, specifically regarding British media, fit into a predictable profile. Unlike traditional readers associated with specific media in Britain, diasporic Cubans do not rely on a single source of information. For example, *The Guardian* was the newspaper most people mentioned (12), but in some cases, this was read as part of a selection of sources that also incorporated radically different newspapers such as *The Sun*. This practice is due, in part, to the educational background the majority of my participants have. For example, only three of my interviewees did not attend university. The majority (22 out of 40) completed higher education in Cuba, while another significant group (13 participants) completed university in Cuba and undertook postgraduate education in British universities. The remaining two participants could have attended higher education in the homeland, but obtained their degrees in the United Kingdom. Overall, this highly educated sample was well equipped to analyse and choose from various news sources.

My fieldwork coincided with the emergence of the Cuban “blogosphere”. Because of its novelty it was impossible to include a detailed analysis of the impact this new form has had on Cuban-Londoners. Since 2007 blogs have become a regular source of information about the homeland for dozens of diasporic Cubans. Many of my interviewees have set up personal blogs and regularly publish their thoughts, not only about the situation on the island, but also about their experiences of living in diaspora.

Online interactions also show an interesting feature about the individual and collective engagement of Cubans abroad. If one pays attention to the number of comments and messages posted on blogs and discussion forums, one can infer the number of diasporic Cubans. However, outside cyberspace, similar numbers of Cuban emigrants are more difficult to find. For example, with the advent of the blogs and social networks online, emigrants in Europe have become more active in organizing protests against the Cuban government and its diplomatic institutions. These protests are commonly advertised online on blogs and websites, which later publish images or video clips of those events. However, the online support generally exceeds the number of real participants who have been significant only in major cities, mainly in Spain. In London, for instance, there have never been protests like these.

Accessing this broader selection of global media has also generated new reading practices for my participants.

Now I read Spanish websites, American websites, British websites; now I read everything. Since I'm here I like to read four or five versions of the same story; that is what I do, four or five versions of the same story, because we human beings think differently and of course, one can have diverse interpretations of a given event. [...] Now whenever I find a piece of news [of interest] I take the headline and Google it, so from there I can see the other news sites [reporting the same story]. (M-A-CH-04)

M-A-CH-04⁶ highlights his desire to find diverse angles for a particular story. He bases his reasoning on the idea that human beings think differently, so their understanding of a determined reality is far from fixed. In diaspora he appears more aware of the interpretations that challenge the main discourse put forward by the Cuban press. Reliance on these different interpretations of Cuban reality allows him to form his own understanding of the events that constitute everyday life in the homeland.

Instead of talking about access, my participants generally used the word “compare” to explain their strategies of media consumption. They would establish comparisons between what was read in the Cuban official media with similar information accessed through other global media. One can argue that Cuban news websites remain a source of information about the homeland, although they have lost credibility amongst respondents. These websites are mainly used to obtain confirmation about certain events happening on the island. This appears contradictory since, as the respondents acknowledged, these sites generally do not publish all the information about what is really happening for ideological reasons.

Many participants also declared they *never* read newspapers in Cuba, an obvious allusion to the main daily *Granma*. This was apparent when they describe it using words such as *muy malo* (Sp. very bad/F-E-CH-03) or phrases like *tampoco dice mucho* (it doesn't say much either/M-U-CH-15). Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that *Granma* was the *only* daily newspaper for eight years (1990-1997). Therefore, to many Cubans the official organ of the Cuban Communist Party was the only representation of what a newspaper was like. Some probably may have thought about transferring reading practices learned in Cuba to the host country. One participant told me that she used to read the entire issue of *Granma*. In London, where most newspapers exceed *Granma's* eight pages, that would be a very time-consuming practice. Therefore, for the majority of my respondents, coming to the United Kingdom also represented their first encounter with a Western newspaper, as well as with other media like the Internet, access to which was quite restricted in Cuba. Therefore, I argue that for many their current reading practice is a habit mainly developed in diaspora.

6. What the emigrants read: Topic selection

The choice of different sources of information resulted in an increased interest not only in media consumption about the homeland but also in global media and in reading practices. This can be examined through the selection of topics relating to the homeland and the comparison between news websites based on other centres of the Cuban diaspora, such as the south of Florida.

As one of my participants summarised:

BBC Mundo is my homepage, not only because I have M, my friend there [...] but also because it is a source of information I trust, more than anything else; let's say that the Cuban websites are like reading a communist newspaper in the country, those that only give you their version; and on the other hand, with the *Nuevo Herald* website or any other, these that are against the system [Cuban government] it is all the opposite; they take it to extremes. (F-I-HO-11)

With her selection of media, F-I-HO-11 aims at gaining a balanced and unbiased representation of the homeland. Because of her experience of reading Cuban media, she can point out their limitations and pitfalls, but that does not make her more sympathetic to other news sources critically reflecting the events in Cuba. For example, her choice of citing *El Nuevo Herald* implies a more serious approach towards news sources, as she can identify the presumed bias of this Miami-based newspaper.

F-I-HO-11's response was typical of answers I received when asking interviewees if they accessed Cuban official media. There was a tendency to compare it with well-known sites from the exile community, like Miami's *Nuevo Herald*. At first, it seemed an extension of the binary political debate between the Cuban press and its U.S.-based counterpart, which might suggest that migrants carried with them the dismissal of Cuban-American media that is common in the island. However, as another interviewee observed, newspapers in Miami can also function as monitors for the Cuban press:

Because you can confront what the *Miami [Nuevo] Herald* says, you can believe it or not, but when you know that some information is published in the *Miami [Nuevo] Herald*, and in Cuba there has been no mention of it, and after some time that information is published [in the Cuban media] and Cuba has to say that it's true, [then] you feel a bit cheated right? (M-A-MZ-05)

However, a different interpretation of these practices is possible: that the disregard of both sources (from Cuba and exile communities) encourages more focused reading practices and a search for unbiased information about the homeland. The question of knowledge about Cuba consists of not only the need to understand current events there or its history but also its institutions and the machinations of government.

M-D-CH-06, for example, explained to me how he investigated the structures of the island's government and society, something he was unable to do as an ordinary citizen through the official media. He describes his search in this extract:

Here I normally try *Cuba por dentro* [Inside Cuba], sometimes I look into the personal lives of politicians in Cuba, and there I found a great deal of information, very instructive, by the way, information that is not given to us in Cuba, just to keep myself up-to-date, to be informed, to know the reason why Cuba is how it is. (M-D-CH-06)

Searching for information about Cuba also becomes a multi-strand process. As many of my participants divulged, they do not surf the Web to discover only factual events, but also to contrast them with the idea of the Cuba they left behind. They arrive in London with a notion of the homeland mediated by their own personal experience, their knowledge of the country's history and their understanding of their previous everyday life shaped by the official media. In diaspora, news is sought not only to get information about the events happening in Cuba but also to support an interest in the migrant's past. In the new context, the emigrants can easily find accounts of past events that had been suppressed by the official press for ideological reasons. By gaining insight into these past events, they engage in a process of re-learn-

ing and re-discovering national history, which is a decisive factor in the process of constructing nation in diaspora.

One of my interviewees, for example, came across the tragedy of the tugboat *13 de Marzo* days before one of her trips to Cuba⁷. When it happened the event was covered in the national press through a brief official note. However, due to the highly political nature of the case, the coverage did not reveal all aspects of the story, especially the number of casualties and the apparent culpability of the Cuban maritime authorities in the disaster. My participant was shocked when she read other versions of this tragic incident and she sent me an email saying that if that was true, she didn't want to return to Cuba. This example shows how a previously held idea of the homeland is critically revised because of access to new sources of news. In my participant's previous construction of the homeland there was no place for such a story. Although she did not totally support the Cuban government, she still retained a positive perception of her country, one that could not contain the idea that security forces could be blamed for killing compatriots. Parallels can be found with similar attitudes towards homeland media related by Hadj-Moussa (2006). Consumption of new and different media disputes the version portrayed and revered by Cuban official media, so Cubans in London turn away from that particular representation of their homeland.

The question of media representation of Cuban society is intrinsically linked with the nature of the country's own media. One of the most common criticisms my participants mentioned was the evident gulf between what is published in the media and what is occurring in society. This was summarised by F-M-SS-11 as the main reason behind her apathy towards national newspapers: "When I was in Cuba I used to read newspapers to know about the outside world, what was happening outside Cuba, because there was no way to find out what was happening in Cuba."

The national media extensively covered international affairs and although other participants deem this coverage to be incomplete, F-M-SS-11 uses it as an example of the information one *can* find in the Cuban press. She was talking about a time before the 1990's crisis, when one could find a large number of publications. However, even in those times, in terms of the availability of news sources, one expected to find more exhaustive comment and reports about Latin America and the United States than about the internal problems that were facing Cubans.

My interviewees' responses reveal an assessment of the Cuban press that highlights its detachment from Cuban society, both suppressing knowledge about events that happened but were never reported and using excessive political content and indoctrination. My participants characterised the Cuban media as generally devoid of "discussion and debate" (F-J-PR-05) and as limited because of the "poor selection of topics covered" (M-U-CH-15), specifically topics relating to society and its dynamics. They also highlighted the evident decisive role played by the Cuban Communist Party in designing media content and the persistent bias found in reports originating from Cuba. The barrier between screen reality and street reality, to use Robins and Aksoy's (2006) metaphor, is also sensed and acknowledged by young Cuban journalists, as Juan Orlando Pérez González (2006) notes when discussing their routines and practices.

In interviews, respondents often used the phrase *lo mismo todos los días* (the same everyday) when alluding to Cuban media. By this they meant they would find the "same" way of reporting as well as the "same" issues daily.

In Cuba, you see only one side of the story, I mean, Cubans in my opinion, [...] and it's bad to generalise, but people there do not think, and I'm not blaming them, because there is the indoctrination; the point of view is only one; people cannot access information other than what the national press offers. So you have to believe, [...] the human being is conditioned to believe just one thing, or to interpret, I mean, not to question (M-P-MZ-09)

M-P-MZ-09 reveals a particular strategy to gain knowledge about the homeland through his news consumption. His choice of words ("think", "indoctrinate", "believe", "interpret", "question") calls for news sources that will provide the reader with more than one view. To him, the Cuban press prevents his compatriots from forming their own opinions about the society in which they live. He argues that Cubans "do not think" because of the "indoctrination" of the press; they "believe" just in what is reported in the media and consequently they do not "interpret or question" what is published. Another possible reading of his explanation could be that ordinary people interpret media messages to discover the functioning of government structures. This broadly means that his consumption of news in diaspora has made him capable of identifying the characteristics of proper press coverage. His criticism of the Cuban press also implies a questioning of power structures in the homeland and the role politics plays in Cuban society.

It is possible to argue then that the emigrants have adopted or developed a critical approach towards the Cuban media. They do not simply believe what is published, but compare it with other media reporting the event. They seem able to identify the zones of silence in the national press and how this lack of content shapes the discourse of the nation. In diaspora, they try to look for various sources to understand, and they question the official representation of the homeland given through the Cuban press. This mirrors Karim's observations about the role diasporic media plays in the re-creation of the homeland, which differs from the institutionalised version of it portrayed by the official media (2003, p. 10). In other words, media in diaspora also challenges traditionally fixed representations of the nation promoted by homeland media.

Robins and Aksoy (2006) have argued that in part the critical attitudes of migrant viewers are expressed by criticizing homeland media content because they do not always portray an accurate image of the nation left behind. They use the case of a Turkish émigré in London who contrasts the images he receives in the host country through the diasporic media with the reality he experiences when he goes back to Turkey and concludes that Turkish television exaggerates. To Robins and Aksoy this shows that diasporic citizens check media against reality when they visit the homeland, whereas those living in the homeland do that on a day-to-day basis (p. 96). Regarding this argument, one of my participants offered a different analysis:

There is something that is very funny. Before I used to see the photos [of Cuba] and I always used to say: they always show the ugliest photos, the worst dressed people [Cubans]. Then I went to Cuba in May last year and I said: it's true that everybody dresses like that in Cuba. But when I think about how I used to dress, how my university friends used to dress you kind of alienate yourself a bit, and then when I went back to Cuba I said to myself, it is true that the majority of Cuban people dress like this. (F-V-CH-05).

This quote shows a critical observation of Cuban reality portrayed by foreign media. F-V-CH-05 disputes the authenticity of those images presenting Cubans as poorly dressed, evoking images similar to people living in rampant poverty. Accessing these images in London

provokes an initial feeling of rejection. When images are compared to her memory of how people dress in Cuba, they are considered inexact, biased. Memory tells her that people she knows dress differently. However, when she travels back to Cuba, she discovers that those images were *real*: there are poorly dressed people in her country. This example differs from the situation presented by Robins and Aksoy (2006). There is no argument made against the homeland media, because when she lived in Cuba she did not question the veracity of the country portrayed by official Cuban media. It is only when her previous reality is shown through foreign media that she can appropriate those images and considers that representation valid.

My participants still search for their own version of home but without the political charge that permeates versions known in the homeland. In diaspora the official media lose their power to put across a politically charged discourse of what Cuba is, so the emigrants' critical reading of the national press constitutes one of the earliest steps in a process of de-politicizing the nation. Hence their resulting notion of cultural identity is de-centred from the homeland in Hall's sense (1992). The constructed Cuban revolutionary identity becomes useless as signifiers of themselves in the new setting. Participants recognise their Cubanness; they feel proud to identify themselves as nationals of the island. However, identification is made in opposition to a previously held idea of national identity and at the same time by acknowledging other possible identities at hand, such as a diasporic identity.

From the interviews I can state that reading practices, which take place individually, form knowledge about the homeland. Participants generally engage in personal searching routines, but that does not imply that the information is individually consumed. News and information are shared with the participants' networks and that exchange results in a construction of knowledge about the homeland and the world around emigrants. I should add that these networks become transnational because participants always refer to friends and families living in other countries, including the homeland. Here we have another example of the tensions between individual and collective experiences concerning Cuban migrants. News media consumption remains a private practice which correlates to Cuban-Londoners experiencing diaspora as an individual development. However, consumption does not end without further strategies involving sharing and spreading news content amongst personal networks promoting interactions, which suggests collective aims. So while communication technologies permit a vast number of transnational networks and the Internet presupposes the existence of a cohesive and established community, the reality contradicts this imagining. Cuban-Londoners sustain collective endeavours to keep themselves up-to-date about their homeland, but these practices take the Internet as the preferred medium instead of the physical space they inhabit, the city, London. Because of online interactions and identifiable active virtual communities one tends to think about the diasporic experience as a distinctive and spatially located human group, but in reality Cuban-Londoners remain dispersed and generally isolated in the hyper-diverse city.

7. Making meanings about Cuba

In the interview design I included some questions aimed at the interviewees' perceptions of their knowledge of the homeland before and after coming to London. I wanted to explore if they were aware of how mediated the representation of the country was and of the propaganda model that guided the Cuban press. Therefore, I assumed that access to global media in London, in addition to the regular consumption of Cuban official media and the exchange

of information through their personal networks, could result in an enhanced way to understand Cuba.

Some participants reduced the issue of “knowledge about Cuba” to knowing the daily events in the country. I was trying to discover if understanding the characteristics of the Cuban media had an impact on the emigrants’ perspectives about their homeland. When asked this question, 16 of my participants insisted that they had an enhanced knowledge of Cuba in diaspora, whereas 11 declared they knew Cuba less. Of the rest of the interviewees, some stated they had the same degree of knowledge, while others were more ambiguous or simply said that it was “different”.

Interviewees said they “knew Cuba” because they lived there. They cited their homeland experience as the main factor in measuring their understanding of their nation. In this regard, I encountered very diverse explanations, although I established three discernible patterns. For some, living in Cuba had been enough to “know” their country. For them, the diaspora experience could result only in having a lesser knowledge of Cuba since they no longer lived in the homeland. In this case, they did not regard the news about Cuba accessed through the global media as very important. This group seemed concerned about information regarding daily events happening on the island, which they cannot know in London, and about the rapid changes in Cuban society in terms of interactions, customs and ways of socializing. The group was particularly varied in terms of gender and educational background, although the majority (eight out of 11) have lived 10 years or more in diaspora.

I think that living abroad for so many years separates you, it moves you farther away from the country. It brings it nearer to the emotional side, because you miss your country, you miss your identity, your customs, your culture, but at the same time you’re distant... In my case, when I return to Cuba, I feel sometimes almost lost; it’s not that I am lost, but I feel lost. Everything has changed [...] but I feel the emotional side [being] abroad, the slightest thing you hear about Cuba, even a criticism you can accept, turns you into an indirect defender of Cuba, but total knowledge of Cuba is definitively lost. (M-R-CH-15)

The second group claimed they had an enhanced knowledge of the homeland, thanks to the media accessed in diaspora. Again, this group was diverse in terms of educational background (including those who did not go to higher education in Cuba) and time in diaspora, but male participants prevailed (10 men and six women). They valued their previous experience in Cuba but also regarded it as “natural” as opposed to extraordinary. Their reading of media in the home country was irrelevant at best or even non-existent. From my data, I could relate this feeling to the conscious understanding of being Cuban in Cuba. Uncovering particular information about Cuba for this second group implies various searching strategies. These participants were concerned not only about current events but also about important issues in the history of the nation they had not previously heard about, especially during the early years of the Cuban Revolution, when most of my interviewees were children or were not even born.

Many claimed they never read newspapers in Cuba even with sweeping statements such as “nobody of my generation read newspapers” (F-M-CH-03). However, diaspora has changed the way they access news sources. My main emphasis here is how participants consume news content about the homeland to gain knowledge about their country. This knowledge influences their subject construction in the long run, because it challenges previous preconceptions and notions about their nation, who they were and their role within Cuban society. Data from

the sample show that only 14 participants (nine men and five women) said they read newspapers in Cuba, whereas nineteen (10 men and nine women) told me that their habits of accessing news and reading newspapers developed only after migration. While the first group comprises young professionals and highly educated Cubans, many of whom acknowledged acquiring reading habits from other household members, the second group is more diverse. For those who were educated during the 1960s through the 1990s, the relationship with news and news sources was part of that education or, as some participants said, indoctrination. Since the early primary school classes, Cuban were compelled to have at least 15 minutes of *Información Política* (Political Information) before lessons. In these sessions, generally overseen by schoolteachers, everybody was expected to discuss the main news headlines of the day. Such a routine might have caused the proverbial apathy that some participants, mostly women (F-A-CH-12, F-D-CH-11, F-S-CH-05 and F-Y-HO-09), expressed towards news and the Cuban press. As F-S-CH-05 put it: they lacked the culture of being informed.

Habits appear to be different in London, where news is consumed regularly or as an everyday activity. In terms of gender, diasporic Cuban women (nine interviewees) slightly increased their habits of news consumption if compared with the number of participants who brought the habit from the homeland (five female participants). In the case of men, the difference was almost insignificant (nine read newspapers before coming, whereas 10 began reading them in diaspora). Based on the literature on Cuba from a gender perspective (Rosendahl, 1997; Holgado Fernández, 2001; Fernandes, 2005) the increase consumption hints at characterisations of domestic spaces as very divided along gender lines. It can be argued that news consumption and the “culture” of being informed pertained to men, while women remained confined to domestic affairs within the Cuban households. Fernandes’ (2005) recount of Magin’s aims highlights how Cuban female journalists and social communicators criticised the portrayal of women by national media and promoted a new perspective in terms of gender. One can argue that if women needed a better image, it was because media programmes and news content lacked a gender balance and as a result were more suitable for a male audience. Generally, Cuban men consume sports and news programmes while Cuban women prefer *telenovelas* (soap operas). I do not claim that my research offers data to challenge that perception or to characterise media consumption in terms of gender, but my findings must not be taken lightly. These findings can be used to explain the migrants’ construction of their homeland as a place of attachment to route their notions of identity.

In Karim’s (2003) words, the migrants appear to challenge the institutionalised version of the Cuba they grew up with. However, as F-J-PR-05 told me, the institutionalised versions of the world have also changed, thanks to media access in diaspora:

I think I know Cuba better because of what I have read abroad, because of what I have found out living abroad. I know it more than what I knew before leaving Cuba, but besides that my vision of the world has changed, my ideas have changed. I am more critical now than before [...] I think that because of my experience, because I have travelled, I can compare, do you understand? That has helped me a lot, my personal experience, not only what I read here... see what I mean? It is that I have experienced it myself and I can make comparisons. (F-J-PR-05)

Constructing Cuba is a question of reading about the country, but the engagement with global media in diaspora goes beyond the search for news about the homeland or the reconstruction of emigrants’ past experiences in the homeland. It also becomes a process of revising their understanding of the world and defining their personal growth. As many said, their

stay in London has coincided with a period of individual development. So, after the years in diaspora, they admit to being more informed now, more able to digest and make sense of their past experiences and more interested in knowing about the country they left behind and about the world they live in now. From the previous quotes, respondents easily classify as a representational public according to Adams Parham's taxonomy (2005, p. 352). However, I could add that although their clear aim is to represent Cuba and its culture, this is not a passive strategy, but a creative one. The information gained through media consumption is used to support the participants' construction of the homeland through a process that constantly re-configures the limits of that representation.

Accessing news about Cuba in London and living in one of the world's most hyperdiverse cities results in changing one's perspectives, not only about the homeland but also about other previously unknown realities:

No, no, no, obviously abroad... the vision one has about reality is very rich, very rich, [...] the one who lives in Cuba and has never been outside Cuba has a very limited vision, and that is not solely the case of Cuba. I have been to countries, to cities in the United States where my students have never been outside their state, and very few have been out of their city if it is a big city. [...] Cubans believe they know the world, perhaps because of their astuteness... the innate astuteness that Cubans have, the Cuban citizen, the Cuban individual, but when they arrive in these countries they bump into a reality that not everyone can bear or can overcome. (M-P-CH-26)

M-P-CH-26 highlights two important hypotheses that relate to Cubans as migrants: their need to overcome the insular perspective, the predominance of "the local"; and the challenge to previous notions of the world, the reality of "the global". Whether enhanced or limited, the question of knowledge about Cuba becomes a particular starting point for my participants' sense of self and to position themselves in their new context of London. Their idea of home (nation) is revised through the re-learning and re-discovering of national history and by incorporating other perspectives about Cuba's everyday life understood from the diversity of news channels, media and migrants to whom they are exposed in London.

Previous studies (Tsaliki, 2003; Bernal, 2006) have explained the use of the Internet as a form of communication that promotes a collective idea of the homeland. These authors claim that a collective feeling seems inevitable, that there is a tendency that media, and the Internet above all, are used to create a common, albeit seemingly "harmless", space where the differences amongst emigrants are erased for the greater good. My experience with the study of Cubans in London shows that this virtual consensus is not always achieved, no matter how efficient online media can be in reducing distances and helping users to identify and share common experiences of emigration. In addition, the "collective" is always looked upon with suspicion in the Cuban context, especially if it is associated with the homeland. Because emigrants recognise that words such as "collectivity" and "unanimity" are to a certain extent artificial, manipulated by their country's press, they become reluctant to admit that new media such as the Internet can create collective units.

Studies of media consumption by migrants tend to focus on the impact of diasporic television and films on promoting a collective idea of the homeland (Dudrah, 2002; Naficy, 2003; Aksoy & Robins, 2003; Dissanayake, 2006). These scholars carried out research with organized émigré communities that are the targets of globally broadcast channels. The story of the Cubans in London is different. There are several television stations based in the United States, and platforms such as YouTube reproduce some of their programmes, but I have little evi-

dence that they are massively consumed by Cubans in London. In the absence of an audio-visual infrastructure promoting a more perceptible idea of national identity, Cuban emigrants have had to embark individually on the creation of that image by accessing news content. They do not seem to adopt the stereotypes put forward by television channels; on the contrary, they commence by accessing multifarious sources of news about Cuba, to construct their own idea of what national identity means.

8. Conclusions

Cubans in London benefit from the availability of a selection of topics and sources of information that appear to be wider than the contents of the Cuban official media. They also describe changes in their reading practices, which lead to a particular new construction of knowledge based on the media they use. Respondents admit to greater awareness of the nature of the Cuban media (based on the propaganda model). In diaspora they acknowledge the relevance of comparing their idea of the homeland previously influenced by media representation with their understanding of Cuba shaped by the media content accessed in London. They also engage in a process of re-learning homeland history based on new knowledge about events that they were not involved in or that they had only the “official” version. As a result, previous notions of Cuba (home) are deconstructed and revised. This idea of the nation emerges from what most of them label as an improved understanding of Cuba; it will prove to be essential when discussing their sense of identity. Interviewees claimed to know their country “better”, not only because of their life experiences before London, but also because of their acquired knowledge about the homeland gained in diaspora through accessing and processing information they were unable to access when they lived in their own country. In the case of the Cuban-Londoners, the question of accessing homeland media and global media evolves into a process where the emigrants’ networks of personal contacts and family play a major role in the selection, circulation and discussion of information and news about Cuba.

I have demonstrated that news media consumption plays a pivotal role in constructing knowledge about Cuba and how this new knowledge contributes to form notions of identity and nation amongst the emigrants. In diaspora, news media are used to validate a relationship with the emigrants’ past and future. Past events are reviewed by a critical use of media, by acknowledging the potential bias of homeland media and the way Cuba was portrayed in the host country. I have shown that media influence the migrants’ future, because notions of nation and culture gained from media access actively intervene in the emigrants’ subject construction. The construction of knowledge through media represents an ongoing process that also influences identity formation. Accessed media reports can be internalised through renovated reading practices, especially for those who lacked the habit in the homeland, to re-define notions of belonging and claims of loyalties to Cuba.

Readings of media in London influence not only personal characterisations of the country left behind but also emigrants’ behaviour and their own understanding of the world. They can compare what various news sources report and develop their own versions that, if related to the homeland, the host country or to similar experiences of other emigrants in London, prove pivotal in positioning themselves vis-à-vis other signifiers of Cubanness.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of the crisis see Mesa Lago (1998), Monreal (2002), Espina Prieto (2005) and Valdés Paz (2005).

² For a history and public profile of Cuban-Americans see Torres (1995), Olson and Olson (1995), Gonzalez Pando (1997), Garcia (2007) and Pedraza (2007).

³ <http://www.cubaencuentro.com>

⁴ <http://www.diariodecuba.com>

⁵ <http://www.penultimosdias.com>

⁶ Every participant was allocated a code of hyphenated letters and numbers in which the first letter stood for gender (M for male and F for female), followed by the initial of the participant's first name, the province of origin in Cuba and the number of years in diaspora. For example, M-A-CH-04 could be deciphered as a male whose name starts with the letter A, who came from Ciudad de la Habana (Havana city) province and had spent four years in London.

⁷ On July 13, 1994, 72 Cubans attempted to leave the island for the United States in an old tugboat named *13 de Marzo* from the port of Havana. After the authorities realised the tugboat had been hijacked, they sent other boats to apprehend it. It ended tragically when the tugboat sank and many of its passengers, including children, drowned.

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