

The Recent Unrest in Cuba: A Textbook Example of Fake News and Media Warfare

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On Sunday, July 11, Cubans took to the streets for the first time in more than twenty years to express their dismay. It seemed like a spontaneous action, but on closer inspection there's a bigger picture here. For sixty years the US has been trying to bring about regime change. In recent years, they have been using social media and mainstream media in a sophisticated way to do so. Recent events in Cuba are a textbook example of this.

“Washington’s hysterical dedication to crush Cuba from almost the first days of its independence in 1959 is one of the most extraordinary phenomena of modern history, but still, the level of petty sadism is a constant surprise.”
- [Noam Chomsky](#)

Digital robots

The protests last Sunday 11 July were preceded by a fierce digital campaign. Renowned Spanish IT analyst Julián Macías Tovar has meticulously researched and mapped it out. His findings are shocking.

In the days before the protests, the hashtag #SOSCuba began to circulate strongly in Florida. The SOS Cuba campaign had already been launched on June 15 in New York, with the aim of influencing the vote in the United Nations General Assembly against the US blockade against Cuba. Without success. [184 countries](#) condemned the blockade, which has been strangling Cuba for more than 6 decades. Only Israel and the US voted against.

The worsening COVID situation in Cuba in recent weeks provided an excellent opportunity to revive the campaign. On [July 5](#), Florida-based media platform SOS Cuba launched a Twitterstorm for humanitarian intervention in Cuba. That happened under the guidance of Agustín Antonelli. This Argentinian is a member of the right-wing foundation Fundación Libertad. This was not his first campaign. He had previously launched [social media operations](#) against Evo Morales in Bolivia and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico.

The first account that used #SOSCuba in relation to the COVID situation in Cuba was based in Spain. On both July 10 and 11, it sent more than a thousand tweets, with an automatic rate of 5 retweets per second. This is done by so-called bots.[i]



Some of the robots used in this campaign are state-of-the-art, expensive and very difficult to detect. We should not forget that the US has recently created a special command for war in cyberspace.

In his research Tovar points out that tweets were sent to artists in Cuba and in Miami to participate with #SOSCuba: protest for the deaths caused by COVID and the lack of medical resources. More than 1100 responses were received to this tweet. Remarkably, almost all of those are from accounts that were created recently or no longer ago than one year. More than 1,500 of those accounts were created between July 10 and 11. The operation made intensive use of robots, algorithms and accounts newly created for the occasion.

With hundreds of thousands of tweets and the participation of many artist accounts, the hashtag became trending in several countries on Sunday 11 July. All that was needed were a few hundred Cubans to take to the streets.

The first demonstration in the town of San Antonio de Los Baños, 26 km from Havana, was immediately publicized in the US by Yusnaby's account with thousands of retweets. Yusnaby (US Navy) is a typical example of an automated fake account.

All this suggests that there has been a [coordinated campaign](#) to attack the Cuban government and blame it for the hardships facing the Cuban people.

Fake news

The messages sent out into the world are full of fake news. One post, retweeted hundreds of times, shows a ten-thousand-strong crowd allegedly marching along the Malecón, Havana's grand seaside boulevard. [Reuters](#) photo checkers found that it is actually a photo - in weak resolution - of a mass demonstration in Alexandria, Egypt Feb 2011. Zoomed in fragments show Egyptian flags.

Another piece of false information sent out into the world is the photo of protesters at the [statue of Máximo Gómez](#) in Havana. These were not counter-protesters but supporters of the Cuban revolution. [Dozens of media outlets](#) and major newspapers like [New York Times](#) and [The Guardian](#), spread this piece of fake news. Reversing reality is a trick that has been used several times in the past on other occasions, including in Venezuela.

● This article was amended on 12 July 2021. The original agency caption on the image of people on the Máximo Gómez monument incorrectly described them as anti-government protesters. They were actually supporters of the government.

Yet another fabrication was that Raúl Castro had fled to Venezuela on a secret private plane. This fake message was retweeted almost two thousand times. [The photo](#) supposed to prove Raúl Castro's flight is four years old, namely when he went to a summit abroad.

These are just [a few examples](#). So were dozens more lies circulating on social media in recent days, including about police brutality.

Source of dissatisfaction

Due to COVID-19, tourism, the main source of income, has virtually come to a standstill. Food prices have risen worldwide. This is hard for Cuba because it has to import 70 percent of its food. The latest sugar crop was also disappointing. In addition, Trump had further tightened the economic blockade with 243 new sanctions. Cuba is now again on a [list of state sponsors of terrorism](#), which makes transactions in dollars very difficult. Biden has not yet changed anything about those measures.

As a result, the country faces an acute shortage of foreign currency, which in turn causes shortages of basic goods, food and medicines. Thanks to the egalitarian system, this does not lead to famines, but Cubans sometimes have to queue for hours to get food or other goods. There are also fuel shortages and shortages of spare parts, causing power outages for hours. That paralyzes transport and it also means there is no air conditioning or refrigerator. In a tropical climate, that's anything but pleasant.

As a result of the tightened blockade, [Western Union](#) had to close its offices in Cuba in November of last year. Many Cubans rely heavily on so-called 'remesas' for their purchasing power: remittances from relatives living abroad. This is the case for many countries in the South. This amounts to [\\$500 billion](#) annually worldwide. For Cuba, remesas have now largely stopped, as a result of which many Cubans have become a lot poorer in one fell swoop.

On top of all this misery came a fierce COVID wave. The vaccination campaign is in full swing, but the population is not yet sufficiently vaccinated to contain the infectious new virus variants. The surge of cases has put a severe strain on the health system.

Foreign sponsors



For the islanders, at least, the situation is extremely difficult. The dissatisfaction is great. According to the foreign mainstream media, the Cubans spontaneously took to the streets. By doing so, they ignore the digital campaigns we mentioned above, but there is more to the story.

A Peruvian journalist from [Prensa Alternativa – El Jota](#) has thoroughly studied the images of the demonstrations. In twelve cities between one hundred and five hundred demonstrators took to the streets. It was striking that in all those cities the same slogans were heard: against the president and for more freedom. There were no references to concrete complaints such as shortages of medicines in the nearby hospital, transport problems in their city or long queues in the stores.

Even more striking, the same banners appeared in the demonstrations with the logo of ‘Cuba Decide’. Cuba Decide is a campaign of [Fundación para la Democracia Panamericana](#). That’s a resource-rich Miami-based NGO aimed at regime change in Cuba.

There will certainly have been spontaneous participants in the demonstrations, but the facts above indicate that the demonstrations were planned, organized and prepared. Moreover, this was done from abroad with the aim of spreading unrest and bringing about regime change. No self-respecting country would tolerate such a thing. In my country Belgium, there are severe punishments for political activity directed from abroad.[2]

Back in 2010, the US made an attempt to install a Twitter system in Cuba. According to the [New York Times](#) the purpose of ZunZuneo, as the system was called, was to “provide Cubans with a platform to share messages with a mass audience, and ultimately to be used for assembling ‘smart mobs’.” Ideal, in other words, for organizing riots.

In recent years, the U.S. government has increased its [financial support](#) of people inside Cuba and in the Cuban émigré community in Miami. This amounts to [\\$20 million](#) annually. Some of this money comes directly from the National Endowment for Democracy and from USAID, two organizations with ties to the CIA. Their mandate is to turn any discontent within Cuba into a political challenge to the Cuban revolution.

Media framing

The coverage of the past events in Cuba by the mainstream media is a textbook example of media framing. We highlight some aspects of it.

First, there is the vocabulary used. One does not speak of government or administration, but

of 'regime'. This suggests a reprehensible political system that should be changed ('regime' change). This term is never used for friendly nations, even if there are a lot of problems with democracy or human rights in those countries. In Colombia, more than [400 political murders](#) have been committed in recent years, yet media still speak of the Colombian 'government'. In India, [camps have been built](#) en masse to deport two million inhabitants, mainly Muslims. Yet we never hear about the 'Indian regime'.

When it comes to Cuba, people also use the word 'dictatorship' without any problem or nuance, while the country has a very extensive system of consultation. No fundamental decision is taken without thoroughly consulting the population. In a dictatorship that is out of the question. Even in our political systems there is no custom or willingness to consult the population for important decisions. The current Cuban government, as well as the previous ones, have always been able to count on strong popular support, otherwise the revolution would not have survived in the extremely hostile and difficult circumstances Cuba has known.

Framing also means overemphasizing or underemphasizing certain issues. For example, the anti-government demonstrations were significantly smaller than the demonstrations in favor of the government. Below you see two pictures of demonstrations supporting the government respectively in Camagüey and in Havana. Images of such demonstrations were invisible in the mainstream media. On the contrary sometimes those images were used, as we saw above, to turn reality upside down.

In addition, the economic context and the factor of the U.S. blockade (dubbed 'the embargo' by the mainstream media[3]) is totally underplayed. Cuba has lost its most important trading partners and foreign investors twice in thirty years.[4] This is an economic disaster for any country. Moreover, the country has been subjected to the longest economic blockade in world history and is cut off from the use of dollars. The blockade costs the country about [5 percent of its GDP](#) annually. Imagine a country like Belgium not being allowed to trade with the EU and to use the euro in transactions. Yet for the mainstream media, the 'embargo' is not an important factor. According to them, the cause of the economic misery lies in government ineptitude.

Our media like to give a forum to Joe Biden. Without any contextualization, the president of the country that keeps an economic stranglehold on Cuba is free to say that he stands by the Cuban people. [President Obrador](#) of Mexico responded that if the US really wants to help Cuba, then they must end the economic blockade. Obrador's message did not make it into the mainstream media.

The key question

In [South Africa](#), riots in recent days have left more than 70 people dead. In [India](#), millions of farmers took to the streets for weeks. In [Colombia](#), at least 44 people have been killed in protests over the past three months, another 500 have 'disappeared'. These facts did not make the news, or barely got a mention. In Cuba, there were several thousand protesters for one day and it was prominent world news.

For serious events such as major natural disasters, massive social unrest, civil wars, coups, etc. it is obvious that they become prominent world news. If an event does not fall into such a category, then the first question we have to ask ourselves is: why is this prominent in the world press, why is this being put in the picture and why are similar events elsewhere not

mentioned at all?

In other words, what makes current affairs news? And the verb is well chosen, for news is *made*. Or rather, a selection is made from the daily large supply of new facts and events worldwide. That selection is then presented in a framing. This selection and framing takes place within a certain ideological framework, in favor of unspoken but specific interests.

Cuba should certainly not be kept quiet in the media. There is indeed news to be found. For example, Cuba is the only small country in the world that developed its own vaccines against COVID-19. By the end of this year it will have produced [100 million doses](#) of home made vaccines. It will export the majority to countries that need them. It would also be interesting [to investigate why](#) the country has [12 times fewer COVID deaths](#) than the US, despite its dire economic situation and lack of medicines. Or, with the Olympics approaching, one could examine how the country has traditionally managed to win an abnormally large amount of [Olympic medals](#).

Apparently such articles do not fit within the ideological framework in which our media operate. Within that framework, the selection and framing of current affairs about Cuba serves primarily to bash the country. The past events are once again a textbook example of this.

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[1] The word bot comes from robot. A bot or social bot is a social media account that is controlled not by a person, but [by an algorithm](#). Such a bot shares and reuses existing messages, for example based on certain topics and hashtags.

[2] [Art. 4, §1 Law March 22, 1940](#) (Belgium): Any person who engages in political propaganda or any other political activity and thereby receives instructions from a foreign power or foreign organization shall be punished by imprisonment from one year to five years and by a fine from 100 to 10,000 francs, to be increased by the opdecimes.

[3] An embargo means that a country refuses to trade with another country. A blockade involves attempts to prohibit or impede trade with third countries. This is clearly the case with the U.S. economic boycott of Cuba. Still, people will use the word embargo because it sounds less severe.

[4] The first time in 1959, when the US was the major trading partner and investor in the country. In 1989 this was the case with the Eastern Bloc.

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