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## “BATISTA IS DEAD”: MEDIA, VIOLENCE AND POLITICS IN 1950s CUBA

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*Alejandra Bronfman*

### *ABSTRACT*

This article takes its point of departure from the attempted assassination of Fulgencio Batista in March 1957. Using archival sources from Havana and Pinar del Río, newspaper accounts, memoirs and recorded sound, it argues that the acquisition of communications technologies such as the telegraph, telephone and radio in the early twentieth century transformed political practices. As the power of these media became increasingly evident, historical actors from all sides of the ideological spectrum came to rely on its capacities for persuasion. If historians have understood 1950s Cuba in terms of a narrative of polarization and conflict, I suggest that attention to technology underwrites an alternative narrative, attuned to transnational networks and with emphasis on shared political practices rather than radical ruptures.

**Keywords:** Cuba, Batista, history, media, violence, politics

### *RESUMEN*

Este artículo tiene como punto de partida el intento de asesinato de Fulgencio Batista, en marzo de 1957. Basándose en documentos encontrados en los archivos de La Habana y de Pinar del Río, artículos de periódicos, diarios y grabaciones, sostiene que la adopción de las tecnologías de comunicación tales como el telégrafo, el teléfono y la radio, a principios del siglo XX, ocasionó una transformación en las prácticas políticas. Conforme el poder de estos medios se fue acrecentando, los actores históricos de las diversas corrientes ideológicas vinieron a depender cada vez más de sus capacidades de persuasión. Si bien los historiadores han explicado a la Cuba de los años cincuenta en términos de una narrativa de polarización y conflicto, este artículo, en contraste, sugiere que al ponerse el acento en la tecnología se produce una narrativa alternativa, ligada más bien a las redes transnacionales y con un énfasis en prácticas políticas compartidas en vez de rupturas radicales.

**Palabras clave:** Cuba, Batista, historia, medios de comunicación, violencia, política

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour point de repère la tentative d'assassinat sur Fulgencio Batista en Mars 1957. S'inspirant des archives de La Havane et de Pinard del Río incluant des récits journalistiques, des mémoires et des bandes sonores, il soutient que l'adoption, au début du vingtième siècle, des nouvelles technologies de télécommunication comme le télégraphe, le téléphone et la radio inspire de nouvelles pratiques politiques. Vu l'influence grandissante des médias, les acteurs historiques de différentes tendances idéologiques ont réalisé combien leur capacité de persuasion s'avère nécessaire. A juste titre, les historiens ont présenté la Cuba des années cinquante en termes d'une narrative de polarisation et de conflit. Contrairement, cet article suggère que l'emphase sur la technologie favorise une approche alternative, liée aux réseaux transnationaux soutenue par des pratiques politiques communes plutôt que des ruptures radicales.

**Mots-clés :** Cuba, Batista, histoire, moyens de communication, violence, politique

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## Introduction

The National Archive of Cuba in Havana contains a document dated 13 March, 1957, entitled "Copy of the speech given by José Antonio Echeverría on Radio Reloj, notifying the people of the attack on the presidential palace committed by the Directorio Revolucionario" (ANC, Fondo Especial, leg.3, #30).<sup>1</sup> The text announces Batista's death with a dramatic flourish: "People of Cuba, the dictator Fulgencio Batista has been finally brought to justice. The echoes of the gunshots that ended the bloody tyrant's life are still reverberating in the presidential palace" (ANC, Fondo Especial, leg.3, #30). It goes on to take credit for the deed, naming Faure Chomón of the *Directorio Revolucionario* as the head of the operation. One and a half pages long, the document closes with an exhortation to inhabitants of the city to leave their homes, take up the weapons stockpiled at the University of Havana, and defend the revolution by attacking Batista's cronies and associates.

The surviving recording of Echeverría's broadcast tells a different story. Two voices come on the air. The first suggests momentous events and introduces Echeverría in rapid-fire tones. When Echeverría comes on, he speaks urgently but more slowly, enunciating clearly so there can

be no mistaking what he says. Only seconds after he announces Batista's death, he is cut off. Unbeknownst to Echeverría, the transmitter had automatically shut itself off in response to a loud noise, as it was designed to do. Listeners tuned in to Radio Reloj never heard the call to take up arms (“La toma de Radio Reloj”, You Tube. Accessed July 2, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The distinct traces left behind—a written text and a recording—speak to both the event and its recorded history. This episode has produced archival vestiges in different forms, from which it is possible to glean a more textured sense of that March afternoon. The tension between the written text, a seamless, hopeful script that imagines how a series of events might lead to the dictator's ouster, and the crackling, jumpy sound of urgency and tentative triumph in the recording that is cut off abruptly, ending without a real ending, bring to bear a tangible, or rather audible, sense of the role of sonic technologies in this particular history. But before proceeding further along those lines, I return to the story.

Of course, Fulgencio Batista did not die that day. The *Directorio Revolucionario*, (DR) an underground student group dedicated to armed revolution, had created an elaborate plan to set off what they hoped would lead to the overthrow of Batista's regime (Bonachea and San Martín 1974; Chomón 1959). After months of deliberation, they had decided to engage in two simultaneous actions. One group, in two cars and a truck marked “Fast Delivery”, drove up to the palace just after three o'clock that afternoon. Its passengers disembarked and ran up the palace steps, killing a guard and continuing inside to look for Batista. Another group of students led by Echeverría left their hiding places in Havana's middle-class neighbourhood of Vedado in three separate cars and drove the short distance to Radiocentro, the complex that housed the radio station, also arriving shortly after three o'clock. While the students at the palace roamed through the corridors looking for Batista (who was finishing lunch in a private study the rebels didn't know existed), Echeverría and a few others entered the station. Before handing the microphone over to Echeverría, the announcer at Radio Reloj read a script that had been prepared for him by Samuel Cherson of the *Directorio Revolucionario*. Once Echeverría discovered that his broadcast had been silenced, he and his companions fled the station and headed towards the University of Havana campus (Bonachea and San Martín 1974; Chomón 1959; Oliveras 1959).

According to contemporary press reports, Batista responded swiftly to both prongs of the attack, but not, as he stated later to journalists, with his own gun. “All I did was use the telephone and give orders to my aides,” he told AP reporters, “although my loaded .45 was very near my hand” (*Christian Science Monitor*, March 14, 1957:14). He had received

some information about an imminent attack, and was prepared to call in palace guards to stop the students from advancing any further. He also notified the army, which sent twenty tanks rolling into downtown Havana. In fact, for most of the episode Batista remained on the telephone, informing the chiefs of police, army and navy of the situation inside the palace as well as fielding calls from concerned friends and family (*New York Times*, March 14, 1957:3; Bonachea and San Martín 1959). The police used their own communications system (apparently the most powerful shortwave network in Havana) and sent officers to pursue those who had seized the radio station. As Echeverría fled Radio Reloj, police officers shot and killed him. Downtown, near the palace, about thirty students and many palace guards lost their lives. Within two hours, tanks had occupied the space near the palace and the combined forces of the military and police had emptied the streets and imposed an armed silence. By early evening, a government announcement over the airwaves proclaimed that everything was back to normal.<sup>3</sup>

The plan to take over Radio Reloj hinged on understandings of the media as an actor, rather than an observer of events. The popular mobilization the students hoped for would only be achieved through a mobilization of the radio itself, a marshalling of its power to their ends.<sup>4</sup> Their failure was less a failure to mobilize like-minded citizens, and more a blindness about the technologies themselves and the ways their opponents mobilized these more effectively than they did. The students' plan was predicated on the instant and widespread dissemination of the news of Batista's death, but they had no way of knowing that their broadcast would be interrupted. And since the call to take up arms in defense of the overthrow never reached beyond the confines of the recording studio, the plan dissolved. By the same token, Echeverría's announcement and ensuing rumors and unrest might have brought Batista down, but he deployed all the communications technologies at his disposal to silence the declarations of his death and the bearers of that message. Control over technology was related to control over violence. The students tried to wrest it away, but Batista retained a firm grip over technologies of communication. And in so doing, he retained control of the situation (Latour 1993).

While this incident merits just a footnote in official histories, it is worth lingering over as a point of departure in a reformulation of the narratives of the 1950s. Historians of Cuba have understood the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a series of causes leading up to the revolution of 1959. Even as they are relatively neglected, the 1950s fit into explanatory schemes as the "before" in what Oscar Zanetti refers to as "before and after" history, read through a lens of impending revolution (2009:84).<sup>5</sup> These histories are concerned with finding ways to explain and analyze overwhelming

support for the rebels from many sectors of society, or, alternatively, with individuals and their actions as they contributed (or not) to the day when everything changed, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959. Analyses deriving from discursive, economic or social perspectives tend to be rooted in an understanding of this period as driven by conflict and the strength of unbridgeable political divisions (Ibarra 1995; Instituto de Historia de Cuba y del Movimiento Comunista y de la Revolución Socialista de Cuba 1985; Pérez Stable 1993; Sweig 2002). While that approach has produced compelling and insightful narratives, it also obscures certain aspects of political culture and practice. In particular, technologies of information and communication, while largely invisible to historians, lay at the center of repertoires of political behaviour (Tilly 2008). By heeding the tools and idioms through which politics was conducted, the 1950s might be envisioned as a collection of consequences rather than a collection of causes. If historians have understood 1950s Cuba in terms of a national narrative of polarization, conflict and incommensurable politics, attention to technology underwrites an alternative narrative, attuned to transnational networks and with emphasis on shared political practices rather than radical ruptures.<sup>6</sup> Rather than understanding the 1950s as merely precedent to the 1960s, I argue instead for an understanding of the period as the product of a changing relationship between politics and communications technology that began in the 1920s. The failed coup was not a cause of the eventual overthrow of Batista but rather a consequence of years of engagement of communications technology by political actors.

In this sense, Cuban political practices and tactics might appear less exceptional and more in tune with political registers throughout Cold War Latin America and the Caribbean. Flows of information in the form of rumors, gossip or stories have often shaped popular mobilization and political outcomes (Scott 1986; Putnam 2012). The media and communications technologies did not create this dynamic as much as insert themselves into already existing networks (Román 2007:Ch. 3; Darnton 2000). In so doing, they amplified or accelerated the circulation of information. Many more people could hear some bit of news and form part of the circuits that passed it along. Similarly, more people had access to technologies that could propagate information beyond the immediately local context. By entering homes and urging people to the street, the media could hail a large crowd efficiently. If ideological divisions informed the *Bogotazo*, the overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala, and the 1973 coup against Allende, widespread assumptions about the media rooted in a recent history of significant incursions into everyday life and political practices also characterized those events (Braun 1985; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1990; Chavkin 1982).

## Technology and Everyday Life

Enmeshed in a network of commercial interests, Cuba obtained access to communications technologies as soon as they were available. The International Ocean Telegraph Company, founded in 1866, took the lead in connecting Cuba and the Caribbean to its system of telegraph cables. By 1870, Havana was part of a circuit that ranged from Key West to Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and the Eastern Antilles. As US and British investments and enterprises expanded throughout the Caribbean, they required the kinds of information flows that could be provided by a telegraph system. Up-to-date price quotes, weather predictions or shipping times could expedite business dealings considerably (Winseck and Pike 2007:61-64). These cables produced a space of commercial enterprise and productivity that shrank distances and brought Havana closer—as measured by time for information to travel—to other commercial hubs (Kern 2003).

More ubiquitous, at least in Havana, was the telephone. The Spanish colonial regime had created a telephone network in 1888, with thirty-four kilometers of lines and 1500 subscribers. In the wake of the US occupations (1898-1902 and 1906-1909), US capital, which had provided the initial financing, took greater control with the creation of the Cuban Telephone Company as part of the growing telecommunications empire, International Telephone and Telegraph. By 1916, Havana had five telephones per 100 inhabitants, half that of New York, but three times that of Madrid. If the telegraph collapsed space for business enterprises, the telephone did so for larger segments of the population, who could obtain news or contact their relatives faster than ever before. In 1921, overseas (or undersea) telephone cables connected Havana and Key West for the first time, allowing for speedier communications among the growing capitalist enterprises in Cuba and the United States. Because of the financial relationships, New York and Havana were linked via telephone sooner than New York and many US cities and towns (Altshuler and Díaz 2004; Pérez 2009; O'Brien 1996).

In Cuba, telephone lines transmitted radio broadcasts in the early years. PWX, the radio station built by the Cuban Telephone Company in 1922, broadcast over existing lines that allowed sound to travel through them with less interference and static. PWX's first broadcast took place in October 1922, only two years after the first commercial broadcast in the United States, and many years before the inauguration of stations in neighbouring Caribbean nations, such as Jamaica, where the public first heard a local broadcast in 1939 (Douglas 1987; *Jamaica Gleaner* December 23, 1938). And yet it was a relatively anti-climactic occasion: not only did President Zayas deliver the opening speech first in English

and then in Spanish, the broadcast may have had a larger audience in New York than in Havana because there were very few receivers in Cuba at the time (González 2002:89-90).

Despite this inauspicious beginning the medium grew rapidly and soon became a flourishing commercial enterprise supported by both US and Cuban companies. By the 1930s commercial radio was an accessible, voluble presence in the daily lives of Cubans. In addition to the proliferation of loudspeakers installed in public spaces, which filled the streets with sound and encouraged listening in groups, domestic sets, ever cheaper and easier to use, became a necessary appliance in middle-class households (Wurtzler 2007).<sup>7</sup> Because Havana had become by this time what Yeidy Rivero calls a “broadcasting hub”, the media permeated urban sonic spaces (2009:279). Broadcasting offered news, ads, and music in eclectic programming that drew from North American models and pre-recorded shows as well as local talent (López 1998; González 2002). The radio diminished many distances: across town, from one city to another, and across the Atlantic to Florida, New York, Germany and Mexico. As Stephen Kern has argued, the speed with which electronic communications took place created a new sense of the present, “thickened temporally with retentions and protentions of past and future and, most important, expanded spatially to create the vast, shared experience of simultaneity. The present was no longer limited to one event in one place, sandwiched tightly between past and future and limited to local surroundings...” (2003:314). By changing the experiences of space and time, broadcasting technologies opened new possibilities for social and political life.

On the air, the boundaries between politics, entertainment, and information were not particularly rigid as announcers and programmers tried to broaden their stations’ appeal by offering news interspersed with music, airtime purchased by political parties accompanied by advertisements, and the occasional government-issued missive. Cubans engaged the radio as active participants as well as merely passive listeners. While radionovelas probably enjoyed the widest listenership, radio programmers sought ways to appeal to audiences more directly with contests, lotteries, and call-in shows, broadcast both nationally and locally (López 1998; González 2002 and 2009).

In the 1950s Cuban audiences had come to expect that the radio would offer solutions to local disputes, predictions of their future, and access to spiritual healing powers. One program, “El Buzón de Clavelito” (Clavelito’s Mailbox), featured Miguel Alfonso Pozo (Clavelito) and his presumed ability to cure ailing listeners. As thousands of letters poured in describing the authors’ various complaints, Clavelito urged his listeners to put a glass of water on their radio sets and wait



for it to become permeated with the healing forces propagated through radio waves. Although the *Ministerio de Comunicaciones* (Ministry of Communications) eventually condemned the program, it enjoyed enormous popularity during its run over several months in 1952 (González 2002:184-211; Román 2007:148-159; López 1998:144-148).<sup>8</sup> If not quite so sensational, longer running programs like “*Lo que pasa en Pinar del Río*”, a weekly program in which the announcer read letters from listeners about local concerns, such as badly behaved neighbours, or sidewalks in need of repair, afforded listeners opportunities to produce as well as consume what was on the radio.<sup>9</sup> Pinar del Río’s audience found that the broadcasts generated, rather than merely reported, stories, as when members of the community wrote in about the questionable expenditures of public resources, and the announcer denounced them on the air. Local officials also used the venue to urge residents to pay their taxes on time, threatening penalties if they failed to do so (APPR, Fondo CMAB, leg. 9, exp. 67).<sup>10</sup> The broadcast acted as a clearing house in which important local business and politics were conducted. Radio became part of a daily routine as it added sounds to densely populated spaces, claimed a particular time as one devoted to listening, or held out to Cubans the promise of “truth”, whether about something as quotidian as the time of day, or as fraught as political corruption or one’s personal access to spirituality (Bracero 2002; González 2009).

### Broadcasts and Politics

Although commercial interests ran and controlled broadcasting in Cuba, other actors, including the student revolutionaries and the government they opposed, found ways to enlist it in their political struggles. Both those in power and those at the margins imagined radio not just as a source of entertainment and information, but also as a medium through which to engage in and disrupt political practices. They were drawn to its powers of persuasion and hoped to exploit the collapse of time and space to further their interests (Kern 2003).

The Cuban government reserved the right to claim airtime whenever necessary for official purposes. An incident from the 1930s demonstrates the political uses of the recently acquired technology. In 1933, protests against President Gerardo Machado’s regime took the form of widespread strikes. In August of that year, truck drivers, merchants, the press, restaurant and hotel staff were among participants in a general strike that left the streets of Havana and other cities deserted. Indoors, the radio became a source of both official declarations and clandestine emissions of underground stations, despite Machado’s efforts to shut the latter down (Phillips 1959:31). On the 7<sup>th</sup>, crowds gathered on the steps

of the Capitolio in Havana. A rumor that Machado had resigned swept through the crowd. According to the *New York Times* the following day, “Cuba’s ‘passive revolution’ flared into violent rioting this afternoon when crowds celebrated a false report that President Gerardo Machado had resigned. Twenty persons are known to have been killed by police bullets, and 123 wounded...” (August 8, 1933:1). Cuba’s *Times* correspondent Ruby Hart Phillips recalled that the crowd had been incited by a man rushing out of the Capitolio shouting that Machado had resigned, and that the news had been simultaneously broadcast over one of the clandestine stations. She speculated that the broadcast and rumor had been part of a plan formulated by Machado “to bring his enemies out into the open” (Phillips 1959:33). The very possibility of ambiguity as to who was responsible for these broadcasts speaks to shared assumptions about the role of broadcasts as a mechanism of mobilization.

As the episode unfolded, broadcasting remained integral to political practices. Machado immediately seized the opportunity to quell reports of his resignation and to suggest that an end to his regime would lead inevitably to United States’ domination: “Tonight, while Havana’s streets were deserted except for patrolling soldiers, President Machado in a radio broadcast to the nation said that the sovereignty of the republic was paramount and that the avoidance of outside interference was absolutely necessary if further bloodshed was to be avoided...” (*NYT*, August 8, 1933:1). Machado’s broadcast the day after the initial riots emphasized again the possibility of US invasion as part of their efforts to intervene. Other politicians used the radio to support Machado’s warnings against US imperialism. *New York Times* reporter J.D. Philips identified the speaker of the House of Representatives, Dr. Guas Inclán, as “one of the main promoters of the intensive radio broadcasting campaign against the United States Government” (August 10, 1933:10).

If these radio campaigns were meant to shore up Machado’s legitimacy, they failed, for in the ensuing days the military turned against him and he was forced to flee the country (*Christian Science Monitor*, August 12, 1933:1). Even as negotiations continued, the army acted on its own, seizing several strategic locations, demanding Machado’s resignation and promising to refrain from violence if he cooperated. Again, the army mobilized channels of communication. The military appealed for the support of battalions throughout the nation via radio broadcasts. They also took control of the telephone system and censored phone calls throughout the island (*Washington Post*, August 12, 1933:1,2). Just over ten years after the rather muted introduction of broadcasting in Havana, effective deployment of the medium proved critical to obtaining a monopoly on (il)legitimate violence.

When Fulgencio Batista took control of the Cuban government in

the aftermath of Machado's departure, he oversaw both the spread of commercial radio and further efforts to control and deploy communications technology. In the mid-1930s Batista promoted a campaign to place loudspeakers in schools so they would have direct access to educational programs. This campaign won the approval of erstwhile critics such as Federico Ibarzábal, the author and editor of the weekly newsmagazine *Social*, who stated that the educational program "deserves our warmest praise" (Ibarzábal, n.d.).

But Batista seemed concerned with more than the dissemination of educational materials. He also made efforts to regulate and contain the medium, indicating a measure of anxiety about the uncontrolled aspect of broadcasting. Repeated letters and instructions sent by the *Ministerio de Comunicaciones* (Ministry of Communications) and the *Dirección de Radio* (Radio Bureau) suggest that control and surveillance was an important, if elusive goal. In a letter to CMAB, a commercial station in Pinar del Río, the Director of Radio reminded the recipients that if the station wanted to broadcast "*actos públicos*" or any kind of public event, they needed to submit a written request no less than twenty-four hours in advance, including details about the station, the event itself, the place, day and time of broadcast (APPR, Fondo CMAB, Correspondencia Recibida, 7 May, 1941).<sup>11</sup> Another letter sent only three months later reminded the station that if political parties were to use radio time, they had to do so in a strictly and literally scripted manner: they were to read from a previously submitted script, completely free of 'calumnies' and 'libel'; only within a determined period of time, and only from stations that had paid the appropriate tariff to the *Tribunal Superior Electoral* (Electoral Board). For some reason, perhaps a lack of compliance, this Director of Radio sent the same letter to the same station only two weeks later (APPR, Fondo CMAB, Correspondencia Recibida, 5 and 19 July, 1941).<sup>12</sup> The government also demanded a clear account of the provenance of official announcements with a request that stations refrain from mentioning their own call signs and to name only CMZ, the station run by the *Ministerio de Educación* (Ministry of Education). In addition, they were required to broadcast from the government station every Sunday evening at 11pm (APPR, Fondo CMAB, Correspondencia Recibida, 1 November 1942).<sup>13</sup> After the 1952 coup, Batista paid close attention to radio stations and announcers, setting up a system of surveillance in which stations were searched and personnel detained on a regular basis (Bracero 2002).<sup>14</sup>

## A Tool of Contention

Just as political repertoires changed for those in power, those in opposition formulated new tactics as new tools became accessible. The *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU), dedicated initially to rooting out corruption in the university, had been founded in December of 1922, only a few months after the initial radio broadcast in Cuba. They soon expanded their scope to attacking political corruption and what they saw as one of its principal sources, the Cuban government's close ties with the United States. They were involved in protests against Machado after he changed the constitution to extend his own term, in 1928 and contributed to the dissent that led to his overthrow in 1933 (Thomas 2001:Chapter 75; Hart 2004; Sweig 2002: Chapter 1; Bonachea and San Martín 1974; Nuiry 2000).

By the time José Antonio Echeverría joined, in the 1950s, the FEU had acquired a reputation for theatrical acts of contention. The university had been shut down numerous times as the government tried to rein in their subversive exuberance. In April of 1952, one month after Batista led a coup that overthrew the democratically elected government, they held a public funeral for the constitution, burying the text on the university campus. In 1956, the FEU performed its final protest and, as the university was being shut down once more, reconfigured itself as the *Directorio Revolucionario* (DR), armed and more inclined to violent acts, with Echeverría at its helm (Anillo 1980).

The DR deployed the media consistently in the aftermath of Batista's coup. Their repertoires were shaped in a broader context in which communications technologies were players in the ongoing drama of protest. During the work stoppages of the 1950s, telegraph and communications workers participated regularly. In 1955, for example, over 200 messengers and telegraph workers joined strikes, generally paralyzing their networks and frustrating government and commercial routines. In addition to strikes, workers engaged in sabotage, destroying telephone lines, breaking transformers and posts, and stealing equipment. In Matanzas, a group of Cuban Electric Company workers known as the '*pica postas*' effectively shut down communications in the province as they repeatedly destroyed telephone posts and cut power lines. Communications workers came to be so closely associated with sabotage that in 1957 Batista authorized the replacement of all Cuban Telephone Company employees with more compliant workers. Moreover, radio broadcasts became an important strategy of rebellion. Frank País announced the names of political prisoners over the radio, in the hopes of deterring police brutality. In one incident in Matanzas, police acknowledged the centrality of technology as they attacked radio

stations and public speakers. Along with burning cane and disrupting railroad lines, wreaking havoc on communications systems was one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenals of opposition groups (García 1998:50-64; Zanetti 1998; Bonachea and San Martín: 56; Anillo 1980).

In May 1955, the FEU planned a student rally and invited a recently amnestied Fidel Castro to speak. The police worked to prevent the rally by blocking transit around the campus of the University of Havana, where the rally was to take place, and cutting off the electricity on campus. Castro never made it inside (*El Mundo*, May 22, 1955).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, according to some accounts, the FEU used a generator to broadcast student speeches to the public even as the police sprayed them with bullets (Bonachea and San Martín:47; Cherson 1959:98). Although their revolutionary strategies would diverge—Fidel Castro and the M26-7 came to disapprove of and never participated in Echeverría's plan—they clearly shared an attraction to the use of sound as a weapon.

The DR's tactics, however unrealistic, came to include the media as a matter of course. In an earlier plan to assassinate Batista, the student Juan Pedro Carbó imagined a public spectacle made possible by the media: "It's very simple: we'll put him in the trunk of the first car, sound the horns and go to the CMQ television studios. We will put the despot's cadaver in front of the cameras and announce his death" (Anillo:130). The plan they actually executed in March 1957 was a pared down version of this. Over the radio, the students could announce a death without having to produce visual evidence. It would be a virtual death, but they were counting on it having the same effect.

In at least one incident prior to the assassination attempt in March 1957, the media worked as a crucial component in performances of dissent. In December 1955, the FEU decided to disrupt a televised baseball game at the Cerro stadium between Habana and Almendares, which they knew would draw a large audience composed of spectators at the stadium as well as at home. During the third inning of a double-header, a group of students leapt onto the field at the third base line, carrying signs of protest against the government. Violence ensued when police tried to stop them, and at least twenty students were injured. Some television cameras turned their lenses to the conflict between police and protesters, with the result that spectators tuned in to Channel Four watched the entire incident. In addition, baseball announcers narrated the events to startled listeners at home. The students had counted on, indeed planned for, the violent police response and the public broadcasts (Bonachea and San Martín:55; Anillo:132; *El Mundo*, December 6, 1955; *Diario de la Marina*, December 6, 1955). As might have been predicted, the press denounced the violence, and the government heightened its control over radio and television news programs, beginning with the

arrests of the cameramen of Channel Four and the sports announcers present at the game and culminating in a general suspension of news programs on Channel 4 (*El Mundo*, December 6, 1955:A-8; Nuiry:fn. 96). If these reactions demonstrated both support for the students and backlash against their strategies, they also suggest the ways in which the media had become central to political practice.

No figure was more emblematic of the power of radio, and of the unclear boundaries between politics and entertainment than Eddy Chibás, the famously outspoken critic of the status quo whose radio broadcasts achieved legendary status. A fellow traveller in efforts to denounce corruption and imperialism, he ended his broadcast of August 1951 by shooting himself in the stomach at the end of his show, believing he was still on the air (Ameringer 2000: Chapter 9).<sup>16</sup> His subsequent death and funeral drew thousands of mourners into the streets of Havana (Ameringer 2000:155). Perhaps Echeverría imagined that the announcement of Batista's death would be a fitting sequel to this drama in addition to a successful replay of the rumoured Machado resignation in 1933. In any event, the spontaneous, uncontrolled nature of both Chibás' final broadcast and the false announcement of Batista's death directly challenged Batista's efforts to control and screen all political broadcasts.

The students' strategy in March 1957 also drew from the politics of local geographies and social networks. Radiocentro was located only two blocks from the University of Havana campus. It housed both Radio Reloj and CMQ, Havana's most popular station, and boasted loudspeakers from which programming emanated. Radio Reloj was founded in 1947, with the purpose, as its name suggested, of acting as a public timekeeper. It acquired a reputation for accuracy, not just as the source of unfailingly dependable demarcations of fifteen minute intervals, but also as a reliable source of news broadcasts within those intervals. Initially located in a small out-of-the-way studio, it was moved to a street level arcade in Radiocentro in response to letters from curious listeners. Passersby could observe programs in the making through the recording studios' windows or sit in one of the cafés and take in the entire spectacle (López 1998:128-129; *Carteles* 1959). Radiocentro produced both programming heard throughout the island and a lively social scene in its immediate vicinity. Echeverría and his friends are reported to have been regulars at the complex and its cafés. One of the announcers, Floreal Chomón, was the brother of a participant in the attack, Faure Chomón (Bonachea and San Martín: Chapter 6). It is not entirely surprising then, that Echeverría should have included Radio Reloj in his plan for the attack in March of 1957.

While it passed through various iterations, the plan to attack the palace had always included a parallel invasion of the radio station. In

strategy talks that took place in January 1957, some proposals included a take-over of the airport in order to close down all air traffic. Others envisioned a group closing off the bridge leading from the palace to Camp Columbia (the seat of the military) as well as snipers placed on tall buildings. Others were eager to attack the bureau of investigation, police precincts and other perceived centers of power (Bonachea and San Martín: Chapter 6; Chomón 1959:82). In the end, plans were simplified and limited to the attack on the palace and the takeover of the radio station.

The plan drew from the conventions of news programs, as DR head of propaganda Samuel Cherson wrote out a script and formulated a scenario in which the announcement of Batista's death would take on the maximum verisimilitude. He prepared a script for Floreal Chomón in which listeners would learn that there was an attack in progress. Chomón would read the announcement twice, followed by a series of ads, as audiences gathered and waited for further information. Only then would listeners hear Echeverría's declaration that the attack had been successful and Batista was dead (Bonachea and San Martín: Chapter 6). Cherson drew from the conventions of radio announcing and news broadcasts to create a sense of reality. He created a tableau in which the regular announcer would relay fresh information. The station would continue its normal format of breaking for ads, making the interruption seem that much more momentous. The scene would be one of controlled chaos, in which radio's authority was never undermined by the shocking nature of the information being conveyed.<sup>17</sup>

Memoirs and interviews by participants in the attack suggest that their determination to assassinate Batista was more powerful than their ability to plan and think about details. They didn't know that a loud noise would shut down the transmitter. Since this happened at the beginning of Echeverría's broadcast, the general insurrection the students hoped for never materialized. The ensuing moments might be described as tragicomic. As three cars left the station and headed for the university, they got separated and stuck in traffic that was held up by the construction of the Havana Hilton. Once they lost contact and Echeverría was killed, the remaining students were at a loss. They went to the university but in the absence of a mobilized citizenry they retreated back into hiding. An abandoned truck full of weapons ended up in the possession of the M26-7 movement, who expressed their discontent with the plan to assassinate Batista by refusing to return it. The police response shifted the genre from tragicomic to full-blown tragedy as they gunned down a number of participants in the ensuing days (García Oliveras 1959; Chomón 1959; Cherson 1959; Nuiry 2000).<sup>18</sup>

The government itself had recently wielded false news to great



effect. The well-known tale of Castro's arrival in Cuba on the *Granma* in December of 1956 is as relevant to an understanding of the 1950s that takes into account the consensus about communications technologies as it is to more traditional narratives about the Cuban Revolution. As Castro and his men disembarked in Oriente and initiated their attempts at armed revolution, Batista's forces met them and decimated a majority of his men, leaving only Castro and a few others alive (Sweig 2002). Newspapers and radio news programs, however, broadcast the news of Castro's death in battle. Rumors abounded as to the veracity of this claim, but for months there was no definitive proof of Castro's life or death (Sweig 2002; Pérez 2010). It was only when *New York Times* reporter Herbert Matthews journeyed into the Sierra Maestra, interviewed Castro, and publicized the interview complete with photographs that definitive proof of Fidel's existence, and Batista's lies, emerged. The interview appeared on February 24, 1957, only three weeks prior to the DR's attempt on Batista's life (*New York Times*, February 24, 1957; Phillips 1959; DePalma 2006).<sup>19</sup> When Batista responded to the *Times* article by (rather unpredictably) lifting some press restrictions, *Bohemia* published Matthews' comments about Echeverría, whom he had interviewed many months prior. Published on March 10, 1957, the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Batista's coup and only three days before Echeverría's death, the article noted that Echeverría was much sought after by Havana's police, that he had abundant hair with a few strands of gray, that he was an anti-communist, and not afraid to die (Nuiry 2000:125; Matthews 1957).

### Politics of the Possible

We return to the false broadcast with some preliminary conclusions. The rebels conceived of the radio as a medium well suited to their purposes. It could take part in the creation of two simultaneous events: the attack and the declaration of its success, regardless of the outcome. That afternoon, the *Directorio Revolucionario* also expanded the present through space, linking the palace and the radio station in a singular violent act. The students imagined first, that the attack and announcement would take place simultaneously and second, that all of Havana would receive the news instantly. Ironically, they lacked the capacity to verify the progress of the attack on the palace. But they depended on that very inability to execute their plan. Without verification, the broadcast could create truth for a chaotic hour, until news to the contrary emerged.

How ordinary Cubans responded remains unclear. In Havana, people stayed inside, familiar enough by now with the dangers of taking to the streets in moments of crisis (Phillips 1959). In Santiago, however,



supporters of the M26-7 moved out into the streets to seek information, or cautiously, celebrate (Hart 2004:174). But the government reacted with a show of force as if the students had succeeded in the assassination attempt. They proceeded by killing many of the rebels and asserting total control over the means of communication. Soon after the false broadcasts, Batista managed to take command not only of Radio Reloj, but of all radio and television stations throughout the island and impose strict censorship. Forbidding the dissemination of images showing any violent encounters between rebels and police, he allowed only government broadcasts on both radio and television (*New York Times*, March 13, 1957:1). Clearly, Batista well understood the importance of communications to the consolidation and preservation of his rule.

Eventually, however, anti-Batista forces appropriated the narrative of this event, which enjoys a curious afterlife. The taped announcement has been broadcast annually on its anniversary, since 1959, as part of a revolutionary effort to commemorate Echeverría as a member of the revolutionary struggle. A heroic revolutionary narrative has incorporated the deed (the attempt, the announcement, the planned simultaneity?) and remembered Echeverría as a martyr.<sup>20</sup> But the surviving recording itself suggests that this heroic narrative obscures the processes by which communications technologies seeped into political practice and imagination. Rooted in commercial enterprise, the format and scope of radio attracted the state, politicians and the opposition. Even as violence became a crucial register in political dissent and political control, actors used the media to extend the reach of violence. From political speeches, censorship and carefully crafted (or outright false) news to sabotage, denunciation, and the staging of revolt, the sound of politics took on new tones in the first half of the twentieth century. Knowledge of assassination, bombing, and kidnapping propagated through the media both terrorized populations and justified the use of further violence. For all actors involved in the attempted assassination of Batista, radio, wireless and telephones both enabled and constrained the mobilization, martyrdom, repression and consolidation of authority that characterized the incident. These events have been understood as informed by profound conflict, as violence that cathartically led to the ousting of a cruel dictator, or in his hands, inflicted wounds and created martyrs in vengeful retribution. But even as the violence escalated, actors observed their purported adversaries closely, borrowing performances and tactics and trading them back and forth in a lethal game. There is thus in addition to the contemporary competing narratives of resistance to dictatorship or of foolhardy youthful unrest, an alternative interpretation of this failed assassination attempt: the story of the ways that technologies of communication and the accompanying assurance of simultaneity informed

the politics of the possible and of the impossible.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Copia mecanografiada de la alocución de José Antonio Echeverría por Radio Reloj comunicándole al pueblo el ataque por parte del Directorio Revolucionario al palacio nacional.” The historiography of the Cuban revolution is very extensive. This is by no means a comprehensive list but rather one that selects from a range of traditions and perspectives. Pérez Stable 1993; Sweig 2002; Suchlicki 2002; Ibarra Cuesta 1995; Instituto de Historia de Cuba y del Movimiento Comunista y de la Revolución Socialista de Cuba 1985.
- <sup>2</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oe9nqR\\_oB8&playnext\\_from=TL&videos=ZOrIJakh8Kg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oe9nqR_oB8&playnext_from=TL&videos=ZOrIJakh8Kg)>.
- <sup>3</sup> This account is a composite summary of articles in the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* 14 March 1957, p.14 and *Prensa Libre* over the days of 13-15 March 1957.
- <sup>4</sup> On radio understood as a tool for nationalist or community mobilization in Latin America, see Hayes 2000; Claxton 2007; Cornejo Portugal 2002; McCann 2003; Alarcón 2007. See also Bryan McCann 2004, for the dissonance between radio’s imagined power and the reality of uninterested audiences.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Quinn 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Histories of science and technology in Cuba are rich and insightful. Yet they also abide by a before and after periodization. See Zanetti Lecuona and García 1998; Funes 2008; Pruna Goodgall 2001.

- <sup>7</sup> Most radio sets sold in Cuba were manufactured by General Electric or Westinghouse.
- <sup>8</sup> The instruction to place glasses of water on the radio sets evolved from an earlier practice, in which listeners would bring bottles of water to the station itself so that Clavelito could “magnetize” them with a flashlight. When this became untenable, he substituted it, thus reducing the crowds at the station.
- <sup>9</sup> “Dos años de un programa radial: *Lo que pasa en Pinar del Río* lo escucha el 97% de oyentes” in *Pinar del Río: el órgano oficial del Comité Todo por Pinar del Río* August 1947, Año 1, #4; letter from Nena Pérez, María Mesa and Celia Suárez to Moisés G. Castañet, February 1952. Fondo CMAB, leg. 11, exp. 130, Archivo Provincial de Pinar del Río (hereafter APPR); letter from Ramón Pérez to Castañet, 11 Nov. 1950. Fondo CMAB, leg. 9, exp. 61, APPR; letter from Pablo Lara Véliz to Castañet, Fondo CMAB, leg. 9, exp. 67, APPR.
- <sup>10</sup> Letter from Pablo Rafael Lara Véliz, 17 Oct. 1950.
- <sup>11</sup> Letter to CMAB from Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Dirección de Radio, 7 May 1941, Fondo CMAB, APPR.
- <sup>12</sup> Letter to CMAB from Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Dirección de Radio, 5 July 1941, Fondo CMAB, APPR. The time period was specified as from the day of *convocatoria* to 7 days after the election. Letter, same as above, dated 19 July 194.
- <sup>13</sup> Letter to CMAB from Dirección de Radio, Negociado de radio investigaciones, 1 November, 1942, Fondo CMAB, APPR.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Wilfredo Rodríguez Cárdenas, 403-411.
- <sup>15</sup> *El Mundo*, 22 May 1955.
- <sup>16</sup> In fact his time had run out and listeners heard an advertisement for Café Pilón.
- <sup>17</sup> In this sense it is reminiscent of Orson Welles’ strategy in *War of the Worlds* (1938), in which announcements of encroaching aliens were embedded in the features of ‘regular programming’. See Cantril 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> These accounts diverge from Sweig 2002 who emphasizes the dissent among the two groups and is the only one to mention the confiscation of the truck full of weapons (p.19).
- <sup>19</sup> Herbert Matthews, “Cuban Rebel is Visited in Hideout: Castro is Still Alive and Still Fighting in Mountains.”

- <sup>20</sup> Thanks to Adrian López Denis and Manuel Piña for the information about the broadcast. As elements in the public, official memory, the “Fast Delivery” truck stands among other significant vehicles in the garden of the Museum of the Revolution, and a plaque marks the spot where police killed Echeverría. The current memory eliminates the friction between Echeverría and Castro over the attack itself.

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