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Translating Solidarity

A growing number of Cuban bloggers on the island are finding their way into English translation, and challenging conventional assumptions about solidarity.

Following Che Guevara's principle to prioritize moral incentives over material ones, the Cuban government promoted voluntary labor during much of the Revolution. Most clearly outlined in Guevara's classic 1965 essay, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," the aim was to encourage all Cuban citizens, particularly the island's idealistic and initially enthusiastic youth, to make altruistic contributions to the collective, replacing the selfish alienation of capitalism with socialism's selfless sacrifice for the greater good.

Such volunteerism was rewarded symbolically with public recognition as a "trabajador de vanguardia" (roughly, a "cutting-edge laborer"), as well as in more tangible ways—for example, allowing these "vanguard" workers to purchase scarce, state-subsidized cars and appliances or granting them the opportunity to vacation at seaside resorts. For those who preferred not engage in these altruistic adventures, a whole series of subtle but not inconsequential penalties and punishments could be brought to bear.

Thus, Cuba's tradition of voluntary labor was not exactly "voluntary," but always balanced moral coercion and social pressure with the spirit of solidarity. This labor mobilization scheme became so common that generations of Cubans raised under the Revolution recall Sunday—the traditional Judeo-Christian day of rest—as "domingo rojo," or Red Sunday, a day when they would be enlisted to take to the sugarcane fields wielding machetes.

In July 2011, the Cuban authorities eliminated the most important remnants of this system by suspending the Student Work Brigades, the Pioneer Action Force, and the University Social Work Brigades. As Cuba's official youth-oriented newspaper Juventud Rebelde explained, such labor mobilization strategies had proven time and again to have an "unfavorable correlation between cost and return."

While this form of revolutionary solidarity has died for many Cubans, a true renaissance is afoot in another kind of volunteer labor—both in Cuba and across the globe—this time facilitated by Internet-based sharing platforms best captured by the term "web 2.0." Call it "crowdsourcing," "peer production," "mass collaboration," or "distributed participatory design," this phenomenon of cybernetic voluntary labor has grown exponentially in the 21st century, as the Internet seamlessly connects like-minded people. One way Cubans have participated in and benefitted from this phenomenon is via crowdsourcing the hosting and translating of many Cuban voices from abroad.

Starting around 2008, Cuba began to witness a coming together of independent bloggers—who started emerging online in 2004—into collectives of mutual support that often included hosting and voluntary translation assistance from abroad. Apart from the pioneering blogger and independent journalist Elaine Díaz, whose posts about Cuba from her blog La Polémica Digital had long appeared in English translation at the website Global Voices, at least two other blogger collectives launched in these early years came to rely on teams of voluntary translators: Havana Times and Voces Cubanas.

Havana Times first appeared exclusively in English; its American expatriate founder and editor Circles Robinson wanted to provide independent reportage about Cuba by young Cubans living on the island to the often ill-informed U.S. public. Evolving out of the previous online platforms of Consenso desde Cuba and
The Accidental Translator

In 2007, I first discovered Yoani Sanchez's blog, then about six months old and being translated into English. I was preparing to travel to Cuba with a Canadian friend whose daughter was working there at the time, with no real plan other than to see Havana and especially the Malecón. We flew from Vancouver (without asking permission from then Vice President Dick Cheney), and through friends and colleagues of my friend, who had been living and working there for several months, we gained a very tiny glimpse into the "real" Cuba. I was immediately hooked.

After returning home, Yoani's blog became my ongoing link to the island. But within a few weeks, the English translation of her blog stopped appearing. My own study of Spanish had consisted of five weeks of "intensive" translation of her blog—growing from off-and-on efforts with friends and family to a steady stream of volunteers from around the globe.

Vividly illustrating the birth and development of this new kind of "cyber solidarity" in the Cuban context, what follows is a report by Mary Jo Porter about how her "accidental" translation of a single blog—Yoani Sanchez's Generación Y—grew into an expanded project to translate independent Cuban voices from the island, under the broad umbrella of "people engaged in work relating to free expression and human rights." Where this project might go in the years to come is still to be discovered, but so far it has been accomplished with an informal and ever changing crowdsourced network of volunteers from around the globe.

Con Todos, by 2009 Voces Cubanas had grouped together over 40 independent Cuban blogs, including Yoani Sánchez's famous Generación Y. In May 2014, it was transformed once again, this time into the independent daily newspaper (and unapologetically for-profit business venture) 14ymedio. These two pioneering projects of independent digital journalism were joined in 2012 by Cuban-American Hugo Canicio's monthly magazine and website OnCuba, which has always been a bilingual for-profit business venture. In October 2015, Elaine Diaz also launched her own non-profit investigative journalism site called Periodismo de Barrio.

The initial effort focused entirely on translating Yoani's blog into decent English. But once that was underway, I had more help than I could use. It was a natural progression to turn to some of the other blogs that had begun to appear on the pioneering digital portal desdecuba.com, a website first launched by Yoani's partner Reinaldo Escobar in December 2004 that featured independent "citizen journalism." We picked up Reinaldo's blog From Here and then Miriam Celaya's Without EVAsion (she initially used "Eva" as her pseudonym). And one by one we added others as they came online in Spanish.

"We" at that time included people who are still involved eight years later, as well as many who came for a while and then moved on. In the first few months, our group included a Cuban-Canadian, who even with his tentative English was very good at making Cuban comprehensible, a Cuban-Spaniard raised in Miami whose father was arrested in the Escambray as a teenager and spent fourteen years in Cuban prisons before going into exile, and an American who had gone to Cuba in the 1970s to cut sugar cane, as a voluntary laborer in solidarity with the Revolution, but later turned her efforts to helping young Cubans settle in the U.S.
Because Yoani had so little Internet access—and because I always said “yes”—I also started helping her to coordinate websites for her blog in new languages. Among those who contributed were a retired psychiatrist in Brazil, a furniture store owner in Japan, an attorney in Amsterdam, a college student in Korea, and an entire college class in Romania.

Meanwhile, the readers of the blogs in their original Spanish jumped in to help in ever increasing numbers. When Claudia Cadelo started her phenomenal Eighth Circle blog, and Regina Coyula launched Bad Handwriting, readers flooded me with emails, insisting they be translated.

Very quickly the challenge became harnessing all this energy in a way that allowed those who “came and stayed” to manage their own work without unnecessary interference, and also supported contributions from those who might have just a few hours to give. Some blogs were assigned to others. For example, Norma Whiting, who came to the U.S. from Pinar del Río as a teenager, continues to translate all of Miriam Celaya’s texts, wherever they appear.

When some of the 75 prisoners from the 2003 Black Spring crackdown on dissidents began driving the regime crazy by blogging from behind bars, Raúl García, Jr., the Miami college student mentioned above, created their blog in English, translated their posts, and, as they were released, became a direct conduit to those still in Cuba and those in exile. Regina Anavy, the former “revolutionary cane cutter,” has translated just about everybody, starting from the first week until today. Most people don’t have that much time or that much inclination, but the theory of “the long tail” tells us that when you crowdsource tasks, you will find someone who does.

In 2010, about two years after we started, Karen and I tried a “cooperative online translation experiment” using Google Docs. We loaded a few posts and invited the world to translate: a whole post, a paragraph, a single line. Within a few days we couldn’t load the posts fast enough.

Karen then suggested creating our own site that would be semi-automatic, and she coded it and continues to maintain it. Called HemosOido.com (We Hear You), the site picks up posts automatically from our “regular” bloggers, and allows us to manually add others. It displays the posts paragraph by paragraph, with spaces for the translations. Translators can, at any time, mark the post “Help” to ask others to edit or finish the translation. Or they can mark it “Done,” which sends an alert to us to check it and post.

Karen also created TranslatingCuba.com, a site where all the posts appear chronologically, so readers no longer have to go to dozens of sites to read all the translated news coming out of Cuba from Cuban bloggers and human rights activists.
From the beginning—despite repeated requests—we have limited ourselves to translating Cubans on the island (though we have stayed with a number of writers who have later gone into exile). Cubans off the island, we assume, have their own access to friends, colleagues, and the Internet—and so the ability to find their own translators. We try very hard to represent a broad spectrum of conflicting viewpoints, but we limit ourselves to voices of dissent; the Cuban government has its own resources to prepare its narrative about happenings on the island, and we have never had an interest in helping them with that.

In a parallel and equally informal effort to bring voices from the island to the world, a loose network of Cuban exiles around the world finds each blogger/activist a padre- no or “godparent” who manages their blog, because Cubans, even today, don’t have reliable Internet access to do it themselves. For years Yoani Sánchez was unable to see her own blog, because of lack of Internet access and later because her blog was blocked within the country. She emailed her posts to friends in Canada, and at times even dictated them; if they hadn’t heard from her for a while, they would call her and take down her latest posts over the phone. Since then, this form of digital solidarity has been repeated over and over for other individuals and groups.

All of this is a brief summary of the “How?” and some of the “Who?” Perhaps the more interesting question is “Why?”

In the very beginning, the answer to that question was simple: I was incredibly naïve and I had no idea so many people were already listening to Yoani and so I imagined her, projecting her voice into the ether with no returning echo. Here was a young woman my daughter’s age trying to make herself heard. I thought that seeing herself in English—of course, she never saw it at all but she knew it was there—would at least let her know someone was listening. Had I had any inkling of who she was about to become, never in a million years would I have contemplated translating such an important voice.

When I first met Ted Henken by phone and email (it was a while before I met him in person), I joked that my intention was to put him out of business. Every time I looked at the New York Times, the Washington Post, or the Wall Street Journal and saw an article about Cuba, I was treated to what this non-Cuban New York college professor had to say about the issue of the day, supplemented, now and then, by other U.S.-based commentators.

Eventually those American voices would be joined, at least from time to time, by the “famous bloguera cubana,” and we might get a few words from Yoani, as if there were only one voice speaking out on the entire island of Cuba. I knew that wasn’t true because one of the things I liked most about the place is that everyone speaks up, all the time and about everything. As Cubans themselves like to say, if there are three Cubans in a room, you can be sure to get at least five opinions.

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But the most important motivation is to try to do some small part to insert the voices of Cubans on the island of Cuba into the world’s discussion and debate about Cuba. We target those who can’t listen to the original because they don’t easily understand Spanish. I feel we still have a long way to go on this one. It’s an ongoing challenge and one, quite simply, that the imperatives of working a day job to support this particular trabajo voluntario haven’t left enough time for.

Ted A. Henken, Ph.D., is the President Ex-Officio of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE) and co-author of the book Entrepreneurial Cuba: The Changing Policy Landscape. He is an associate professor of sociology and Latin American studies at Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY).

Mary Jo Porter is trying to retire from a long career in transportation and urban planning to devote herself and her old age to translating even more Cubans who are working from the island for human rights.