

Journalism and disintermediation in professional routines in Cuba: an analysis of virtual press rooms and the role of digital tools in the relationship between institutions and journalists

Periodismo y desintermediación en las rutinas profesionales en Cuba: análisis de las salas de prensa virtuales y del rol de las herramientas digitales en la relación instituciones-periodistas

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Abstract:

Digitalisation in Cuba has impacted the management of institutional communication and transformed interaction flows between media and PR professionals. New tools, such as virtual press rooms, introduce innovative dynamics for information management while altering journalistic routines within the Cuban media system. This study proposes an analysis of the digital applicability to the Cuban institutional and journalistic context by characterising the role of virtual press rooms across 24 central state administration bodies. In addition, 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews are carried out with journalists and academics linked to various media outlets to learn how their thematic agendas are constructed, considering technological mediation and the relations of influence between both parties. The results show that these corporate communication tools facilitate access to information for journalistic production. However, they also act as obstacles to accessing personal sources, hinder access to documentary sources, and complicate two-way exchanges between journalists and corporate sources. All of this occurs within a context of emerging disintermediation, wherein corporations aim to broadcast news and information directly to citizens, bypassing the filters of official media.

Keywords:

Virtual press rooms; media relations; corporate communication; disintermediation; journalistic routines.

1. Introduction

Cuba's late adoption of the Internet –implemented institutionally in the 2010s and made available to citizens there after– provides a valuable natural experiment for understanding how new journalistic routines are developed and how relationships between sources and journalists differ from established digital communication practices in other Western countries. The effects

Resumen:

La digitalización en Cuba ha impactado la gestión de la comunicación institucional y ha transformado los flujos de interacción en la relación fuentes-periodistas. Nuevas herramientas como las salas de prensa virtuales proponen novedosas dinámicas de gestión informativa a la vez que alteran las rutinas periodísticas en el sistema de medios. Este estudio propone un análisis de la aplicabilidad digital al entorno institucional y periodístico cubano, mediante una caracterización del rol de las salas de prensa virtuales de 24 organismos de la administración central del Estado. Además, se complementa con 11 entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad a periodistas con vinculación a medios para conocer cómo se construyen sus agendas temáticas considerando la mediación tecnológica y las relaciones de influencia entre ambas partes. Entre los resultados destaca que estas herramientas de comunicación institucional facilitan el acceso a información para la elaboración de piezas periodísticas, pero funcionan como obstaculizadoras en el acceso a fuentes vivas, entorpecen también el acceso a las fuentes documentales y dificultan el intercambio bidireccional entre periodistas y instituciones. Todo esto en un contexto de desintermediación emergente, donde las corporaciones aspiran a emitir noticias e informaciones directamente a la ciudadanía saltándose el filtro de los medios oficiales.

Palabras claves:

Salas de prensa virtuales; relación fuente-periodistas; comunicación institucional; desintermediación; rutinas periodísticas.

of digital transformation and the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) within Cuba's communicative framework have catalysed a series of social and political transformations, prompting a need to update the regulatory, structural and production frameworks of the Cuban media and communication system. National Legislative developments, such as the approval of a new Policy for the Informatisation of Society at the VII Congress of the Communist Party, aim to provide a strategic plan to ensure effective and participatory citizen engagement in the digital space. Additionally, the 2017 approval of the Project for the Conceptualisation of the Cuban Economic and Social Model for Socialist Development until 2030 and the drafting of a Social Communication Law Bill –discussed during the current legislative session of the General Assembly of the Communist Party of Cuba in April 2023– offer a new regulatory framework for communication and the press in Cuba. This evolving structural context underscores that information and communication are fundamental rights for Cuban citizens, reflecting the government's commitment to advancing information and communication technologies that promote active citizen participation in civil society (Communist Party of Cuba, 2017).

The Economic Ordering Task, implemented on 24 November 2020 through Decree Law 17, has promoted new forms of non-state economic management (economic decentralisation), simultaneously reshaping the role of the State through reforms in subsidies and income distribution. The emergence of local media initiatives –community radio, non-state press, and specialised magazines– (Martínez González, 2017) now boast an active and widespread presence in cyberspace. Couple with the consolidation of social media platforms as channels for citizen interactivity and as sources for the dissemination and promotion of media content (De la Paz, Pérez Alonso, Gómez Masjuán, 2016) has facilitated a rupture from the traditional communicative model towards an intermediary model (C2I). Consequently, this shift has led to a disintermediation in the channels of access to information that were previously monopolised by the Cuban State.

At the same time, the mediations inherent in Cuba's sociopolitical system and its informational and communicative superstructure, characterised by the State's comprehensive oversight of public, media and editorial policies, significantly impact the roles of the press and the media system. Cuba's media information system “is distinguished by being a model centred on propaganda and vertical information” (Muñiz and Castillo, 2023). Moreover, the influence on media content and the shaping of public agendas stem from the regulatory activities of the Communist Party, which serves as the highest ideological authority (García Luis, 2013). These particularities in media practice and their external regulation are crucial mediations for any critical research on agenda-setting and production routines within Cuban media.

The ongoing struggle for symbolic power between traditional Cuban media and the narratives emerging from new channels (Sosa Varcácel, Aguilera Moyano, De la Noval-Bautista, 2019) is transforming media processes and production routines. Today, this shift has led to a noteworthy integration within newsrooms as part of a broader editorial restructuring process, as well as the convergence of languages, platforms and modes of hypertextual and transmedia production in Cuban journalism (Rodríguez Guerrero & Gómez Masjuán, 2018). Alongside this phenomenon, Cuban institutions have become active participants in the digital sphere, employing institutional communication tools such as websites and virtual press rooms (VPRs). These tools enable institutions to establish channels for contact and feedback with strategic audiences, including the public and the media.

Virtual press rooms in Cuba's institutional landscape enhance information production from institutional communication cabinets through three key dimensions: 1- positioning online content about the institution's activities, 2- producing content and information aimed at being incorporated into the media agenda, 3- documenting/ archiving historical material for the press (Taboada Castell, Merchán Mota, Cantalapiedra González, 2021). This dynamic can lead to information overload and create new opportunities for citizens to access sources directly without journalistic mediation (Cantalapiedra González, De Alzaga Fraguas, Iturregui Mardaras, 2017). At the same time, it enhances the inherent advantages of digital platforms, enriching communication flows between journalists and their institutional sources while constructing their journalistic pieces. While in the rest of the Western world, the use of the Internet has widely consolidated a more decentralised model of social communication and information processes over the past two decades, Cuba is still in the early stages of adapting to network technologies. All of the above, combined with the unique socio-economic, political, and ideological characteristics of Cuba –a nation with a socialist model that permeates all aspects of civil life- where policies for effectively integrating the internet into the media and communication system are beginning to transform certain practices, motivates the conception of this study-.

1.2. Source-Journalist Relationships and Virtual Press Rooms in the Context of Disintermediation

The “Press Agent” and “Public Information” models proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) have served for decades as a reference framework for understanding how communication cabinets engage with, produce content for and interact with journalists in Cuba. Following the establishment of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television in 1976, the management of not only the information disseminated to the public but also the synergies and relationship between media outlets and Cuban institutions at all levels was governed by a media structure shaped by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (García Luis, 2014). Consequently, the selection and access to sources by journalists became regulated by this same authority, which was tasked with outlining, directing, and regulating the information policy of official media (De Aguilera Moyano; De la Noval Bautista, Sousa Varcácel, 2019).

Since the formulation of both models, the contextual framework in which journalists and communication professionals operate has changed significantly due to the proliferation and establishment of information communication technologies (ICTs). Earlier models of media relations were based on the unidirectional influence of Public Relations on journalistic activity and the management of publicity (Bernays, 1936 en Cutlip & Center, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), assuming the media's defenselessness against corporate lobbying (Fernández Souto, Almansa Martínez, Castillo Esparcia, 2018). However, we are currently observing an evolution in this theoretical framework. On the one hand, there is a notable process of bidirectional co-creation of content between media outlets and corporations; on the other hand, there is a pronounced “disintermediation of the press in the communication process with implications for public opinion” (Iturregui Mardaras, Gutiérrez Cuesta, Cantalapiedra González, 2020, p.10).

In the era of the Internet in Cuba, the adaptation and use of technologies have been, at best, slow and precarious processes (Elizalde, 2013; García Luis, 2014; Saladrigas Medina, Oliveira Pérez, 2016; Muñoz Zúñiga & Castillo Salina, 2023) an instrumentalist conception of the press has been perpetuated by political officials, national institutions, and civil society. Within journalistic organisations, the engagement with sources and the search for the necessary information –whether through in-person or non-documentary means– has been characterised as “institutionalised and regulated” (Souto-López &

Cáceres-Hernández, 2010: 105). Even in a scenario marked by digital convergence, a unidirectional and transmissive dynamic predominates, with journalists occupying the role of the most active agents in their interactions with sources. Routine practices continue to prioritise information notes, consistently hierarchising the same news values. Moreover, a culture of secrecy and censorship of information by institutional sources is normalised (Molina Rodríguez, 2019).

Understanding strategic communication within Cuban institutions requires consideration of the conceptual divergences in corporate, institutional, and organisational communication. While corporate communication involves research and planning categories within a market-oriented framework, authors like Villafaña (2000) and Rodrich (2022) argue that institutional communication moves beyond merely economic and commercial interests, clearly differentiating it from commercial communication. In Cuba, communication across diverse organisational spaces –public administration institutions and state-owned enterprises to service institutions– has a dialogical and social dimension independent of economic interests. Instead, it aims to strengthen the structure of the enterprise-state-citizenship relationship, grounded in the country’s political and ideological pillars of organisational life (Saladrigas Medina; Oliveira Pérez, 2016). Consequently, when examining the communication efforts of Cuban entities that significantly interrelate in the public sphere, the term institutional communication is preferred.

Digitalisation has provided institutions with sufficient tools to communicate their messages directly to citizens, bypassing media filters. Implementing websites and virtual press rooms frequently reflects bureaucratic and propagandistic characteristics, resulting in a lack of dialogue and ineffective resource utilisation (Moreno, 2015). This dynamic further complicates relationships between journalists and corporations “since reporters are left powerless when faced with institutional sources that refuse to provide information” (Molina Rodríguez, 2019: 418) and instead rely on their own channels as dissemination platforms.

This represents a trend towards disintermediation, characterised by the loss of the journalist’s capacity to inform while other actors gain it (Albertos, 2001; Deuze, 2008; Macnamara, 2014; Segura, 2014; Cárcar, 2015; Iturregui Mardaras, Gutiérrez Cuesta, Cantalapiedra González, 2020; Diez Gracia, Sánchez García, Martín Román, 2023; Moreno Mesa & Sánchez Decicco, 2020). In other words, we are observing a global publishing system that operates independently of traditional editors and intermediaries, as the Internet “functions as a great disintermediator” (Albertos, 2001, p.24). Information circulates between sources and users with increasingly minimal media intervention (Deuze, 2008). This shift is shaping a context for institutional communication where media outlets no longer settle for merely aspiring to influence but rather aim “to claim journalistic methods as a guarantee of their work” (Iturregui Mardaras, Gutiérrez Cuesta, Cantalapiedra González, 2020: 10) and to take a leading role in disseminating information by bypassing the filter of the media directly. This scenario ultimately reinforces the well-known anti-public relations (PR) rhetoric prevalent among journalists (Macnamara, 2014) and underscores the love-hate relationship that characterises their interactions (Harcup, 2009).

In this scenario, a growing number of journalists and editors are advocating for the extensive use of material from public relations (PR) or institutional communication practices in today’s newsrooms, viewing these sources as informational subsidies (Xifra, 2011). Media outlets tend to reproduce, often quite literally, the statements or speech acts of social actors in the media (Méndez Nieto, Paniagua Rojano, León Gross, 2018). This highlights an increasing dependence on statements

provided by sources. Meanwhile, communication cabinets fill their digital spaces with reports detailing their institutions' actions and declarations. By focusing on the production of statements, institutions are exerting more significant influence on the media agenda (Casero Ripollés, 2012), leading to a decline in in-depth analysis and independent investigative reporting.

Virtual press rooms have their roots in the traditional functions of institutional communication cabinets (Almansa-Martínez, 2005; Castillo Esparcia, 2006). Over the past decade, they have served as spaces hosted on institutional websites designed to aggregate content aimed at the media (Pettigrew & Rebber, 2010). They function as portals for the creation and dissemination of information both internally and externally (Almansa Martínez, Castillo Esparcia, 2015). Moreover, these digital spaces offer innovative solutions for managing communication between sources and journalists (García Orosa, 2013; Cantalapiedra González, De Alzaga Fraguas, Iturregui Mardaras, 2017).

The evolution of the elements constituting current virtual press rooms (VPRs) is remarkable. These spaces have transitioned from traditional tools and resources used by communication cabinets, such as press releases, reports, and corporate documentation (Wilcox, Cameron, and Xifra; 2013), to more sophisticated information technology tools within institutional settings. VPRs now feature electronic agendas for press conferences, live streaming, subscriptions for journalists, etc. (García Orosa, 2013; Durántez Stolle, 2017). Today, VPRs adopt a more interactive model tailored to their target audience: journalists (Paniagua, Gómez, and Fernández, 2015), incorporating elements such as media monitoring, press reviews, social media, and external links, among others.

Through these virtual press rooms, corporations can generate a continuous and updated flow of information to the media “while simultaneously serving as a channel for information requests to the company and offering particular advantages for some organisations with limited resources to invest in costly marketing tools” (González-Herrero & Ruiz de Valbuena, 2006: 268). While PR professionals and communication cabinets acknowledge that the primary purpose of using technologies in their routines is to facilitate relationships with the media (Pettigrew and Rebber, 2010), there is growing concern among journalists and academics regarding the limitations of these spaces in providing scientifically rigorous and neutral information. Some have even raised concerns about the de-professionalisation of staff managing these spaces, who often lack experience or adequate training in media relations (Macnamara, 2014; Molina-Rodríguez, 2019). Additionally, there are notable shortcomings in establishing bidirectional communication channels and fostering dialogue between journalists and sources (Taboada Castell, Merchán Mota, Cantalapiedra González, 2021).

2. Objectives

This research analyses the emergence and consolidation of new Internet production routines in institutional communication and Cuban journalism. It also aims to contextualise the current state of journalistic practice in Cuba concerning the appropriation and application of technologies in daily routines. To achieve this, the following objectives are proposed:

- O1: Understand the applicability of digital tools in institutional communication in Cuba by assessing virtual press rooms on the websites of selected institutions.
- O2: Characterise the role of digital tools in the production routines of journalists working in state media in Cuba.
- O3: Examine the role of these technologies in the relationships and interaction flows between journalists and Cuban institutions.

3. Method

The research employs a methodological triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. First, a diagnostic study is proposed through a formal structural content analysis, focusing on the presence and characteristics of virtual press rooms (VPR) within the Cuban institutional framework. This tool enables the mapping of the current state of digital applicability in the communication cabinets of Cuban institutions.

This diagnostic study has been complemented by 11 semi-structured interviews with Cuban journalists with varying years of experience and active involvement in the Caribbean country's media landscape. This technique provides valuable insights into the extent of technological convergence in Cuba's major national and local newspapers. It also helps to understand the role of virtual press rooms in journalists' production routines during their processes of exchanging information with sources.

The analysis sheet used in this study is inspired by an analytical model systematised by the Bitartez Group of the Basque University System, using Typology A within the framework of Project CSO2014-56196-R, designed for descriptive studies on virtual press rooms. It has been validated within the framework of the same project and implemented in numerous studies on virtual press rooms (Cantalapiedra González, Iturregui Mardaras, García González, 2012; Taboada Castell, Cantalapiedra González, Merchán Mota, 2021; Unda Endemaño, Taboada Castell, Iturregui Mardaras, Cantalapiedra González, 2024).

The indicators for the data collection form are primarily derived from the methodological approach developed by the Bitartez group during the course of the project. After conducting a preliminary diagnosis using Web 2.0 in institutional communication relations and reviewing the existing literature, the research team drafted an initial proposal. This preliminary model was then contrasted in a second phase with the work team members, who had professional experience in both media and corporate communication cabinets. To achieve this, discussion groups were held in Madrid in March 2017 in a venue provided by the Rey Juan Carlos University. These discussions also included national-level journalists and communication managers from various institutional and corporate communication offices. The coding team responsible for developing the content analysis form is as follows:

Table 1. Experts Coding Content Analysis Sheet (Anonymised)

Coders Research Team Phase 1	Coders Research Team Phase 2	External Coders: Journalists and Communication Managers
EI1. Professor at the University of the Basque Country	ET1. Consultant and Freelance Journalists	P1. Journalist and Director CTXT
EI2. Professor at the University of the Basque Country	ET2. Consultant and Freelance Journalists	P2. Journalist Grupo Zeta
EI3. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	ET3. Consultant and Freelance Journalists	P3. Journalist Voz Pópuli
EI4. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	ET4. Consultant and Project Designer	P4. Journalist Cadena Ser
EI5. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	ET5. Journalist <i>Agencia EFE</i>	P5. Journalist and Director of Online Publishers Association Europe
EI6. Senior Lecturer in the Department of International Relations UPV/EHU	ET6. Doctor of Communication and Art Director	P6. Director of the magazine QUO
EI7. Professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Seville	ET7. Adjunct Professor Audiovisual Communication and Advertising Department	P7. Journalist in <i>El Confidencial</i>
	ET8. Professor Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	P8. Journalist in <i>El Mundo</i>
	ET9. Adjunct Professor Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	P9. Journalist and Co-Director at Dragon Press
	ET10. Professor of the Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	P10. Journalist in <i>ABC</i>
	ET11. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism UPV/EHU	P11. Head of Communication in BBVA
		P12. Head of Communication in Ogilvy Public Relations
		P13. Head of communication ONCE
		P14. Director of Communication Google Spain and Portugal
		P15. Head of communication Madrid City Council
		P16. Head of Communication Rivas Vaciamadrid Council
		P17. Head of Communication UNICEF
		P18. Head of communication FELGTB

Source: created by the authors

Furthermore, the research incorporates proposals for variables from previous studies on virtual press rooms to assess their technical features and types of content (García Orosa, 2013; Parejo Cuéllar, 2015; Paricio et al., 2019) as well as factors related to usability, contact options, and dissemination (Durántez Stolle, 2017; Herrero-Gutiérrez et al., 2017). As a result, the variables within the analytical framework are organised into three fundamental categories: 1- formal characteristics and structure, 2- information tools and resources, and 3- design and interaction possibilities.

Table 2. Content Analysis form/sheet. Categories and Indicators

Category	Indicators
Characteristics and Structure of the Virtual Press Rooms	Type of Institution
	Name of the Institution
	Designation of the Virtual Press Room
	Location on the Web
	Interlocutor
	Target Audience
	Access
Information Tools and Resources	News
	Press Release
	Call
	Statements
	Agenda
	Press Conference
	Press Kit
Design of the Press Room and Interaction Possibilities	Corporate Documentation
	Media List
	Social Media Profiles
	Contact and Interlocution
	Content Design

Source: Project CSO2014-56196-R MINECO, created by experts

The sample comprises 22 State Central Administration Agencies (OACE) in Cuba and six higher State Management bodies. These agencies are responsible for overseeing “the direction and administration of one or more branches or sub-branches of the economy, or political, economic, cultural, educational, scientific, social, security, or defence activities” (Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, 2019). They represent functional organisations that occupy the top hierarchical level within the direction of the Council of State and Ministers, carrying significant responsibility for disseminating public information. However, during the diagnostic phase of the study, access to some of these agencies’ websites proved unfeasible as they were not operational online. Ultimately, only 23 institutions were consulted for this research.

Table 2. List of Selected Institutions in the Sample

Entity	Website
Home Office	Not Available
Ministry of the Armed Forces	Not Available
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	http://www.minrex.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment	https://www.mincex.gob.cu
Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment	https://www.citma.gob.cu/
Ministry of Higher Education	https://www.mes.gob.cu
Ministry of Finance and Prices	https://www.mfp.gob.cu
Ministry of Food Industry	https://www.minal.gob.cu/
Ministry of Agriculture	https://www.minag.gob.cu/
Ministry of Justice	https://www.minjus.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Education	https://www.mined.gob.cu
Ministry of Labour and Social Security	https://www.mtss.gob.cu/
Ministry of Construction	Not Available
Ministry of Culture	https://www.ministeriodecultura.gob.cu/es/
Ministry of Communications	https://www.mincom.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Transport	https://www.mitrans.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Tourism	https://www.mintur.gob.cu/

Ministry of Domestic Trade	https://www.mincin.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Economy and Planning	https://www.mep.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Public Health	https://salud.msp.gob.cu/
Ministry of Industries	https://www.mindus.gob.cu/es
Ministry of Energy and Mines	Not Available
National Assembly of People's Power	https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/
Attorney General's Office	https://www.fgr.gob.cu/es/
Presidency of the Republic	https://www.presidencia.gob.cu/es/
Cuban State Council	Section within the website of the Presidency
General Controller of the Republic	https://www.contraloria.gob.cu/
Supreme Court	https://www.tsp.gob.cu/

Source: created by the authors

The diagnostic study was initially conducted in January 2023, during which the analysis sheet was completed for 70% of the institutions included in the sample. This data was later updated between May and June 2023 following the research team's stay in the Faculty of Communication at the University of Havana.

The interviews were conducted using a phenomenological approach (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado & Baptista Lucio, 2006; Creswell, 2013), focusing on describing individuals' subjective experiences concerning a shared phenomenon and understanding the common categories that emerge from these experiences. The interview design was semistructured, featuring open-ended questions that allowed the research team to intervene intentionally based on the topics that arose during the discussions. The interview questions were developed around the following premises/postulates, derived from the documentary-bibliographic analysis and the content sheet design:

- The influence of digital applications, such as virtual press rooms (VPRs), on the production routines of journalists.
- The frequent use of VPRs and their resources/elements as documentary sources to prepare journalistic pieces.
- The role of VPRs as facilitators or barriers in the search for information and the communication flow/exchange with members of the communication cabinets.
- The increasing independence of institutions from the media in disseminating information labelled as news.

For the results analysis model concerning the interviews as a qualitative technique, discourse analysis has been applied through a “thematic analysis” to the previously transcribed responses to identify themes based on response patterns. Through this process, conclusions are drawn for each identified theme.

A non-probabilistic intentional sampling method was employed to select participants for the interview round. The primary criterion for inclusion was that the interviewees must have active connections to media outlets in Cuba. Consequently, all participants in the final sample are journalists with professional ties to media organisations. Although the lack of a Census of journalists in Cuba complicates the identification and contact with potential subjects, the collaboration of the Union of Journalists of Cuba (UPEC) and the Faculty of Communication at the University of Havana was leveraged. During the research team’s visit, this collaboration was facilitated through the course “Mobile Journalism”, which was conducted by the José Martí International Institute of Journalism in La Havana from the 10th to the 14th of April 2023. This course provided an opportunity to present the project and select members for the sample, following an indirect recruitment method. Participants provided prior acceptance of the “Informed Consent”, in accordance with stipulations approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Basque Country for research involving human subjects.

The course had an attendance of 30 journalism graduates and professionals from across the island, forming the study universe. By applying the selection criterion of “active involvement in media outlets”, the study universe was narrowed down to 11 participants, as a significant portion of the attendees consisted of post-graduate students. To calculate the representativeness of the sample and to determine which subjects should be interviewed to ensure the scientific rigour of the study, the following formula was applied:

With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 7%, it was determined that a representative sample would consist of 11 participants.

Finally, these 11 participants with ties to the media voluntarily accepted and signed the Informed Consent and participated in the round of interviews, which took place at a venue provided by the José Martí Institute of Journalism. The details of this relationship are documented in the following table:

Table 3. List of Interviewed Journalists

Code	Profession	Gender	Professional Training	Professional Trajectory
P1	Documentalist for Television	Woman	Journalism	5 years in the media
P2	Professor and Broadcaster	Woman	Journalism	25 years in the media
P3	Editor in Specialised Magazine	Woman	Social Communication	9 years in the media
P4	Professor and Television Journalist	Woman	Journalist	30 years in the media
P5	Professor and Television Journalist	Woman	Social Communication	20 years in the media

P6	Professor and Communication Consultant	Man	Philosophy	21 years in the media
P7	Journalist on Television	Woman	Journalist	24 years in the media
P8	Journalist on Television	Man	Journalist	29 years in the media
P9	Journalist on Television	Woman	Journalist	31 years in the media
P10	Journalist on Television	Woman	Journalist	10 years in the media
P11	Journalist and President of the UPEC	Man	Journalist	37 years in the media

Source: created by the authors

4. Results and discussion

After analysing the virtual press rooms of 23 Cuban State institutions (18 ministries that had an online presence at the time of consultation and 5 institutions from the General Council of State) and subsequently interviewing 11 journalists and professor-researchers actively involved in Cuban media, the following results were obtained regarding the applicability of these institutional communication tools in the digital environment and their impact on the journalistic routines of national media.

4.1. “Doing Communicating” in a Technological Convergence Scenario: Journalistic Routines in Cuba

In light of the structural crisis faced by the media system in Cuba in 2018 –characterised by ageing staff, minimal or no investment in innovation, challenges in editorial and economic management, and rigid top-down regulations (Rodríguez Guerrero, Gómez Masjuán, 2018)– the current landscape, marked by increasing informatisation and a post-COVID shift towards digital strategies, reflects a transformation in how the Cuban press operates, stemming from hypermedia convergence:

Investment in technology in most of our media and the current connectivity options helps us save resources, resolves the crises of shortages we have, and, of course, it even saves informative moments by allowing us to verify and deepen information in real-time” (P10. Personal communication, 14 April 2023).

This need to transform information management models in the context of media convergence, a demand voiced by academics for years –has gained traction with the recent commitment to digitalisation by the Cuban government. This initiative has successfully driven digital convergence in the media (De Aguilera Moyano; De la Noval Bautista y Sousa Varcácel & 2019).

Our newsrooms today are extremely dynamic, not only in production processes but also in the mindset of Cuban journalists. Just a few years ago, discussing the creation of on-site reports conducting live interviews for real-time news segments or journalistic innovation, even when it was visible elsewhere in the world, was not common practice (P6, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

However, most interviewees contend that Cuba lacks a consolidated culture regarding using and accessing digital tools at all levels. Technologies challenge and reconfigure “the roles of the subjects of communication, the producer or professional

journalist and the audiences” (Segura, 2014, p. 117). Establishing a compelling economic and editorial management model in Cuba is inconceivable without investing in innovation, research, and a systematic, standardised approach to technological literacy nationwide. “We are halfway between conceptualising the process and then adapting it to digital platforms, and thinking about communication products and those interaction processes from the logic of digitalisation itself, not just a mere copy and paste” (P3, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

The implementation of the Policy for the Informatization of Society at the VII Congress of the Communist Party over the past five years, along with accelerated technological convergence, has significantly transformed the institutional communication routines of professionals. The interviews show that institutions are enhancing their online presence and allocating resources to platforms such as social media, email communication, forms, press kits, etc. However, there remains an ongoing conflict within most Cuban institutions: the dispute over channels and spaces for information in both formats.

There is a balance between publishing informational notes that serve as primary sources of information and, on the other hand, the work in those press centres or physical press rooms, using traditional resources such as press conferences or briefings (P6, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

The analysis sheet on virtual press rooms within the studied institutions and their formal characteristics yields complementary results in this section. Eight-seven per cent of these institutions feature a dedicated section on their websites for public relations materials. At the same time, nearly one-fifth do not allocate space for centralising content aimed at journalists. The accessibility of the content further enhances these presence indicators. In all cases analysed the spaces are freely accessible and unrestricted for both journalists and the general public. Notably, in 61% of the cases studied, the journalists’ section is easily accessible from the main menu. These findings align with the premise that there is indeed an emerging technological landscape in Cuba, serving as a transversal component in social communication processes. Prior to 2017, it was evident that Cuba lacked sufficiently modern infrastructure and a culture conducive to understanding and applying technologies within corporate dynamics in the Caribbean country (Martínez González, 2017). As one respondent notes, “The staff from our institutions, ministries, directing bodies has realised that in Cuba today, you cannot think of any communication process without taking into account the digital environment, and their online presence, with the few resources allocated to it, is viewed positively” (P10, personal communication, April 14).

Cuban institutions’ digital presence facilitates access to information and supports journalistic management. However, interviewees emphasise the precariousness of the information provided through virtual press rooms. They point out that institutional representatives often use these platforms to establish distance from direct contact with live sources, thereby hindering the potential for more investigative journalism.

4.2. Media and Source Relations in Cuba: A One-Way Street or Reciprocal Exchange?

Two aspects have characterised the traditional dynamic of source-journalist relationships. First, it involves a relationship aimed at exerting influence (Grünig & Hunt, 1984). Second, it encompasses a dynamic based on personal relationships that serve social purposes between both parties (Souto López and Hernández Cáceres, 2010). Virtual press rooms and websites represent a significant qualitative step in that relationship, facilitating the provision of informational and management

solutions within the traditional source-journalist relationship (García Orosa, 2013). However, the process of digitalisation in Cuba is not without its challenges. “The conception in other countries compared to the conception in Cuba regarding websites and virtual press rooms is a more transmedia view of communication. This means that digital platforms in Cuba are considered information storage facilities” (P5 personal communication, April 13 2023).

The interviewees recognise a growing documentary perspective regarding these digital tools, such as virtual press rooms and web portals. “On one hand, there is a work of verification and material research in these virtual press rooms or web portals because they provide information that later shapes the journalistic piece” (P2, personal communication, 13 April 2023). However, they also highlight several constraints related to the design and usability of these platforms that hinder the flow of information exchange and the development of lasting relationships: information presented is often outdated, the criteria for its selection and treatment lack professionalism, and these platforms exacerbate a culture of bureaucracy and the mechanisms of permissibility needed to generate an encounter with live sources. “These websites are outdated, user pathways are very difficult, and achieving transparency without censorship in the information they post is very challenging; thus, everything remains very protocol-driven” (P1, personal communication, April 13, 2023).

The results from the content analysis sheet corroborate the previous premise. Corporate documentation (91%), often without download options, and the news archive (95%) are the most prevalent resources. In contrast, more interactive resources that extend beyond purely documentary purposes –such as social media presence (82%), electronic agendas (21%) or contact forms/chat (47%– are significantly less represented. This suggests that an instrumental approach prevails, positioning these platforms more as showcases of content rather than as tools that facilitate the exchange process. “These news tabs are still storage places for what the institution considers newsworthy, but the information becomes outdated very quickly, or they often replicate information that the media has already published about the institution or sector” (P8, personal communication, 14 April 2023).

It is crucial to cultivate and nurture the relationship between journalists and sources as new technologies evolve rather than allow it to be hindered (Iturregui Mardaras, Cantalapiedra González, Hernández Cuesta, 2020). Journalists recognise the value of these platforms for extracting, analysing, and verifying information. However, they insist that websites and institutional portals sometimes act as barriers to communication flows. “Rather than being facilitators, they are obstacles because they do not allow contact with the source or hinder it” (P8, personal communication, 14 April 2023).

4.2.1. Deprofessionalisation of Communication and the Press in Cuba: Training and Execution Thought Out from A Digital Logic?

In Cuba, there exists both political and academic will to train multimedia communicators and journalists, but “in Cuban institutions, there is a lack of professionalism: special attention is needed for human resources, because the communication cabinets of an institution can not consist of just one person, often with a profile that is not even communication-related” (P2, personal communication, 13 April 2023). Researchers and professors from the Faculty of Communication emphasised that while academia strives to train journalists and communicators, Cuban institutions must better understand their narrative and social functions to communicate effectively through their websites. “Building that narrative requires audiovisual and

multimedia, from a discussion forum to a download site. But for that, a team with the right skills is needed” (P3, personal communication, 13 April 2023). A journalist from the Cuban television information system complained about the lack of communication professionals in the Virtual Press Rooms:

With the issue of the policy of informatisation of society, each State administration body or enterprise in the economic sector has developed its communication apparatus, website, and press room. I have yet to come across one of these apparatuses, which is truly made up of communication specialists. (P9, personal communication, 14 April 2023).

Placing communication at the centre of governance necessitates a focused emphasis on enterprise and human capital (Álvarez Chacón and Rodríguez Cruz, 2023) and investing in resources, innovation, and training for personnel who should have an academic background in institutional information management. The interviewees recognised and expressed concern over the poor state of communication management in many contemporary communication cabinets despite the range of technologies available to them. “In many institutions, they have discarded the figure of the journalist or the communicator because they feel that anyone can create a press release” (P1, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

The findings from the analysis sheet support this assertion. The category “interlocutor” refers to a designated person for institutional communication and appears in only one-fifth of the analysed cases. Furthermore, among those institutions that do not identify an interlocutor, 82% designate the institutional responsible party as a webmaster or “IT specialist”. This analysis indicates that the personnel within the communication cabinets of the analysed institutions do not typically have backgrounds in information and communication sciences. Moreover, whether they possess the necessary data-handling skills or informational content selection and production remains unclear. This observation aligns with the comments from interviewees, who noted that many managers and institutional leaders “lack the training or discernment to know which information to prioritise, because they lack newsworthiness criteria and do not have the competencies to know how to engage with journalists” (P7, personal communication, 14 April 2023). Such shortcomings hinder the flow of interaction between sources and journalists, disrupting the encounters between both parties (García Luis, 2014).

4.3. A Balance of Forces: “Institutions that Make News” and “Is there a disintermediation of Cuban Media?”

Many voices within the academic and research communities in social sciences in Cuba are expressing concerns about the ongoing de-professionalisation of Cuban journalism, a trend exacerbated by the complex relationships between sources and journalists in the country (Molina Rodríguez, 2019). “The culture of bureaucracy that persists and the intricate mechanisms of permissibility makes it increasingly difficult for journalists to conduct investigative work or critical reports” (P2 personal communication, 13 April 2023). At the same time, there is a general perception that Cuban institutions, through their Public Relations practices and institutional communication tools, are increasingly viewing themselves as less dependent on the media. “The functions of media journalists are increasingly overlapping with those of communicators or workers in communication cabinets” (P5, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

Regarding this finding, the analysis of data collected in the analysis sheet shows that among the total resources and materials for PR intended for journalists, the analysed virtual press rooms predominantly utilise the “news” genre (21%), which is exclusive to journalism, as a form of institutional material. This figure surpasses that of “press releases” (17%), statements

(13%), or even “press kits” (10%). This trend indicates a practice in institutional communication, already noted by other voices in the international scientific community (Iturregui Mardaras, Cantalapiedra González, Hernández Cuesta, 2020) of resorting to an informational genre exclusive to journalistic practice to generate information about the institution. This sentiment was echoed during the interviews:

Now, digital sites, these web portals, believe they own the information; some sites are starting to act like the original source owners and are the first to proclaim to the public that they have exclusive information. (P2, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

The value of digital platforms in Cuba for articulating new institutional narratives with citizens and journalists is widely recognised thus far. However, the interviewees assert that this overabundance of sources (Serrano Puche, 2013) and current information’s capillarity lead to an emerging disintermediation. Despite this, they emphasise the importance of journalistic vocation and practice, which other actors cannot replace:

It may be the case that the web portals of Cuban institutions want to pursue the goal of exclusivity, releasing information before the media, not needing journalists to position content and monopolising information. Nonetheless, they need the journalists’ skills to organise the information” (P2, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

Reflections have also emerged concerning the social legitimacy of institutional sources compared to the broader legitimacy of national press outlets, which defend “true journalism, in-depth journalism, investigative journalism” (P8, personal communication, 14 April 2023). “Although the media often simply reproduces the same press release that the institution published, the public is less likely to question that media outlet, and the institution is still not regarded as a credible source of information (P3, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

Even among the more optimistic voices that support the social legitimacy of official Cuban media, concerns are emerging about the ever-increasing ability of Cuban institutions to issue and disseminate information without the mediation of journalists. “In Cuba, I believe that this kind of disintermediation is not as consolidated as it is in countries with other content production and consumption models, but I do see it advancing in leaps and bounds.” (P4, personal communication, 13 April 2023).

5. Conclusions

Digitalisation in Cuba is driving a shift in public communication and information processes, comparable to the emergence and consolidation of digital technologies in the Western World over two decades ago. The research findings also reveal theoretical implications that contribute to advancing the scientific literature and conceptual frameworks established in previous contributions.

Firstly, despite limited resources and access to better technological infrastructures, digital applications, such as virtual press rooms (VPR), have indeed transformed the production routines of journalists in Cuba. This suggests that even within a media environment constrained by the particularities of its press model (Muñiz Zúñiga and Castillo Salina, 2023), technologies have managed to redefine the relationships between sources and journalists, introducing new conditions in that relationship (Masip, 2005; Aguirre Gamboa, Anaya Ávila, Laurencio Meza, 2023).

Despite their transformative potential and in line with the aim of addressing the role of these technologies, limiting factors persist. The results from the analysis sheet reveal that Virtual Press Rooms (VPRs) function as content repositories, offering limited opportunities for interactivity and reciprocity between journalists and sources, which complicates the flow of contact between both parties. Similarly, the analysed statistics show that VPRs overwhelm the communicative space with an institutional narrative conveyed through press releases, statements, declarations and information labelled as news. As institutional sources, they capitalise on their content production capabilities and informational agendas to position themselves as agenda-setters (Diez Gracia, Sánchez García, Martín Román, 2023).

Several contrasting key ideas have emerged thus far. On the one hand, the influence of these technologies on the production routines of Cuban media indicates that hypermedia convergence in institutional communication facilitates centralised access to information and documentation that journalists need to craft their journalistic pieces. However, at the same time, these technologies serve as obstacles to accessing live sources. They complicate user pathways and hinder journalists' ability to contact institutional representatives.

On the other hand, journalists are losing their exclusivity in the dissemination of information. The nature of the publications appearing in virtual press rooms (VPRs), most often labelled as "news", reflects a desire on the part of institutions to be recognised as media outlets (Aruguete, 2017) while highlighting topics that serve their private interests, sidelining broader public concerns (Albertos, 2001). In the context of digitalisation, the ability of institutions to publish their own content through online portals puts the role of journalists as mediators of information intended for the public in jeopardy. The study's findings demonstrate that this disintermediating role also affects the final product that reaches audiences, influencing the establishment of thematic agendas and determining what is considered relevant or newsworthy for inclusion in the informational product (Albertos, 2001). Thus, one of the central debates emerging from the study's findings, which contributes to advancing the theoretical foundations of agenda-setting theory (McCombs y Shaw, 1972) and its evolution within the context of digitalisation (Ardévol Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga, McCombs, 2020) is that institutions or companies not only influence editorial decisions but also fill the communicative space with information that serves private interests. This dynamic significantly impacts the establishment of topics of interest for citizens.

The interviewees also emphasised the persistent lack of competencies and capacities within institutions to develop a journalistic method, highlighting their inability to replace journalists effectively. The effort to make institutional thematic agendas transparent on these online portals remains inconsistent and fragmented, undermining the credibility of the institutional narrative among citizens and positioning it in favour of official media.

Finally, future research could explore the perspectives of leaders and communication cabinet officials in Cuba regarding their relationship and exchange with journalists, mainly as mediated by the technological capabilities now at their disposal and the new contingencies emerging within the institutional landscape, such as the trend towards de-professionalisation in the roles and profiles of their members. Additionally, given its status as a natural experiment, the findings from this study provide a valuable comparative framework for understanding the evolution of digitalisation to disintermediation in Western countries where internet access has been available for over two decades.

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8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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