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Unpacking *El Paquete*

The Poetics and Politics of Cuba's Offline Data-Sharing Network

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Abstract

With online access heavily restricted, Cuba has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world. Yet, Cuban citizens have found a way to distribute all kinds of web content in the form of El Paquete Semanal, *a one terabyte collection of data that is compiled by a network of people with various forms of privileged internet access and then circulated nationwide on USB sticks and external hard drives via an elaborate network of deliverymen. In this article, I show how* El Paquete *has come to constitute a nested media ecosystem that facilitates the publication of independent local media content, hosts several digital marketplaces, and offers an otherwise non-existing space for advertisement. Its enormous local relevance and scope sets it in competition with the Cuban state that reacts ambiguously: it largely tolerates the* Paquete *as long as compilers continue to self-censor overtly political content. While state officials have repeatedly criticised the "banality" of its material, the government recently felt obliged to distribute its own alternative weekly data compilation called* Mochila *(backpack) via its youth computer clubs and official cybercafés. I therefore seek to understand* El Paquete *as an arena in which the relationships between citizenry and the state are currently being re-negotiated.*

Introduction

Internet access for ordinary Cubans has been restricted by three main causes: government policies that ban all independent private media for fear of freedom of information and expression, the US trade embargo that prevents greater access to new information and communications technologies and the continuing crisis of the Cuban economy that prohibits investments in digital infrastructure (Press 2011). Cubans therefore come to experience a double digital divide: their low level of access to internet-enabled devices is combined with frustratingly slow connection speeds due to inadequate infrastructure. As private home access remains prohibitively expensive and very rare, to get online, the vast majority of Cuban people consequently must either queue for a public computer in one of the state-run

cybercafés (salas de navegacíon) or huddle with their privately owned mobile device in one of the crowded public Wi-Fi hotspots the government-run service *Nauta* has established in public squares and parks since 2015. These hotspots, however, are often unreliable, have slow service speeds, and are very expensive for Cuban standards. Since December 2018, a 3G cellular network is being rolled out that finally provides mobile internet for users who possess smartphones, but the pricing and poor network speed does not allow for more data-intensive activities such as webcam communication, or the upload or download of larger data files.

Yet despite these severe limitations, millions of Cubans can engage with global media content on a daily basis and have access to the latest in international movies, TV series, YouTube videos and mp3 music albums. This is thanks to *El Paquete Semanal* (the weekly package), an offline peer-to-peer data-sharing network in which digital material is distributed in physical form via USB sticks and external hard drives. Every week, *El Paquete* contains about one terabyte's worth of folders and files and is circulated nationwide with the help of an elaborate human infrastructure of deliverymen (so-called *Paqueteros*) who bring the content to the remotest corners of the island and deliver right to their clients' homes. *El Paquete* is a highly elaborate example of a set of offline media practices that digital anthropologists have seen crop up and studied in various areas as ingenuous answers to digital deprivation (e.g. Burrell 2012; Donner & Walton 2013; Hobbis 2017). It is reported to have a massive economic impact, reaching about half the population, generating at least $1.5 million a week, and giving work to about 45.000 people who sustain the distribution network (Wall 2017). Western media have become increasingly fascinated by this phenomenon, variously labelling it Cuba's version of Netflix, Hulu or Spotify (e.g. Harris 2015; Neely 2017).

In contrast to such reporting as well as previous anthropological scholarship on Cuban media consumption (Pertierra 2012; Boudreault-Fournier 2017), my aim in this article is to show that *El Paquete* is in fact much more than a mere collection of digital entertainment. It has developed into a veritable media ecosystem that provides various platforms for advertising as well as digital marketplaces for buying and selling otherwise hard-to-come-by consumer goods. It hosts a video-sharing community substituting YouTube and constitutes a networked communication system that interconnects consumers and increasingly allows them to publish content themselves. In what follows, I will explore *El Paquete* as part and parcel of a wider Cuban communication ecology. The concept of "communicative ecologies" (Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn 2003; Hearn and Foth 2007; Slater 2013) departs from a reductive analytical focus on particular media technologies and their possible "impacts" or "effects" and rather proposes a holistic understanding of whole system interactions, of how milieus of agents are connected with their social networks by various exchanges of mediated forms of communication within larger communicative environments. Foth & Hearn (2007) conceive of a communicative ecology as having three layers: a technological layer consisting of the technological devices and infrastructure that enable communication and inter-

action, a social layer consisting of people and (formal as well as informal) social modes of organising them, and a discursive layer which encompasses the content of communication, the themes or ideas that constitute its social universe. Within the Cuban communicative ecology, I understand *El Paquete* as a "communicative assemblage," a term Slater (2013) introduces to substitute for the taken-for-granted category of media that is often analytically isolated from their social context and embeddedness. As I will show, the concept of communicative assemblages allows us to comprehend how human users and material tools distribute agency through their interaction in a specific local context.

To unpack the *discursive* layer of *El Paquete*, I will provide a detailed ethnographic content analysis (ECA) (Altheide & Schneider 2013) of one week's release that I will further compare with the (albeit much less popular) state-provided alternative called *Mochila* (backpack) that is distributed through the government-run *joven clubs de computación* (youth computer clubs). My analysis of the *social* and *technological* layers of *El Paquete* (as well as of the wider communicative ecology it is implicated in) is based on findings generated through participant observation and interviews with *Paqueteros* and their clients that I carried out during Summer 2018 in a neighbourhood in Centro Habana, one of the most densely populated municipalities of the Cuban capital. In sum, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 individuals – eight *Paqueteros* and 20 customers, ranging in age from 18 to 66 years old. I approached individuals in places that sold *El Paquete* or contacted *Paqueteros* through the contact details stated in their advertisements they publish on classifieds platforms. I then used purposeful, snowball sampling to recruit additional contacts. Besides neighbourhood stores that sell CDs, DVDs and digital data, I also visited state-run *salas de navegacíon* and *joven clubs*. At these places, I had informal conversations with at least 20 additional persons. Last, I conducted six expert interviews with employees in *El Paquete*-production houses and advertisement agencies, as well as with content creators such as Cuban musicians and video bloggers who distribute their work through *El Paquete*.

El Paquete's Origins

In its current form, *El Paquete* has existed since around 2008. While various individuals have claimed in the Western media to be its original founder (e. g. see Helft 2015; Crecente 2017), it is doubtful if one single inventor exists as *El Paquete* has evolved out of older media circulation networks that offered an alternative to the tiring propaganda of state television and the restricted access to foreign media. When I asked *Paqueteros* or their clients about what was before *El Paquete*, they often referred to various other forms of informal media distribution. One *Paquetero*, the 42-year-old Alejandro,[1] told me that his father used to rent out

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1   I have changed all names for anonymity.

foreign books in the 1970s, romance or detective novels in paperback that were left behind by Western travellers and came to be the first entertainment materials distributed outside of government control after the Revolution. By the 1990s, there existed an informal video rental system based on VHS recorders and cassettes and illegal satellite antennas that allowed the grabbing of US and Latin-American TV programming. VHS thus provided a technology that first facilitated the copying and physical distribution of foreign films (Pertierra 2009). Miguel, another *Paquetero*, told me that before *El Paquete* he compiled so-called "combos," self-authored DVDs sold in neighbourhood shops that compressed three or four different (but thematically related) foreign movies onto one disc. With the further penetration of computers on the island that made data copying available to more and more people, a distribution system for digital data was a logical next step. While the national TV programming has somewhat given in to Cubans' desire for entertainment and now also airs Western movies and Latin American telenovelas, the main objective of today's *Paquete* is to make up for the lack of internet. Its weekly one terabyte of content is compiled by a network of people with various forms of privileged online access. The data that make up *El Paquete* are secretly downloaded at university computers or at government workplaces or luxury hotels, brought into the country on physical hard drives by friends or relatives from the United States, or, still, captured from illegal satellite dishes, yet nowadays with the help of digital streaming media recorders instead of VHS players. Its compilers thus make a business out of redistributing their access possibilities so that millions of people are able to take advantage of them. All this material is then gathered by various production houses, called "casas matrices," that rename the files, sort them into different folders and eventually compile their own editions of *El Paquete*. These matrices come and go, but currently there exist four main production houses in Havana: Omega, Estudios Odisea, CrazyBoy and DeltaVisión, with Omega and Odisea widely regarded as the most important ones. Normally, a new *Paquete* is released every Monday, but some matrices now even offer less extensive daily updates. Given the vastness of the material to be structured and organised, individual folders are often curated by outside producers. Odisea's "musica nacional" section of mp3s and music videos for instance is compiled by the well-known local producer Abdel la Esencia who self-consciously imprints his label onto the files' metadata and as watermark onto the videos. In return for providing content to the matrices, these producers can sell advertisement space in their respective folders or they often take fees from content creators who want to reach the public via *El Paquete*. The individual matrices are not necessarily known to the public (in fact, only about half of the consumers I interviewed had heard of them) as they sell their product only to intermediate distributors who then further adapt the content by mixing different *Paquete* versions, leaving things out, or adding additional material. Further down the distribution chain, *Paqueteros* who directly deliver to people's homes gradually learn to understand their customers' tastes and customise their product accordingly. *El Paquete*'s content is thus so flexible

that it actually makes very little sense to speak of it in singular (and I only do so here because it is locally referred to in this way).

Inside *El Paquete*

In what follows, I will present an ECA of a typical (and randomly chosen) release of *El Paquete*, its Monday, 20 August 2018 edition(s). As Altheide & Schneider (2013) note, ECA is an exploratory approach to analysing media documents that is based on principles of qualitative data collection. It is used to document and understand the communication of meaning through emergent patterns, emphases and themes. ECA sees the meaning of media documents as inscribed in the "poetics" (or aesthetics) of the message, i.e. in various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm or audio/visual style. These aesthetic dimensions of the investigated documents are understood to reflect wider aspects of culture. ECA's distinctive characteristic is the highly interactive nature of the process of research conception, data gathering and analysis. It thus requires a "recursive and reflexive movement between concept development–sampling–data collection–data coding–data analysis–interpretation" (2013: 26). I have triangulated my insights obtained through immersion in *El Paquete*'s content with data gathered through "traditional" ethnographic methods, i.e. participant and non-participant observation and interviews. These findings I further weave into my analysis and interpretation of *El Paquete*'s social meaning.

To make sense of the shape-shifting form of *El Paquete*, I bought it from two different sources on the same day and copied each version in its entirety onto my hard drive. The first version I bought from a DVD shop on my street in Centro Habana. It contains 15,578 files and a total of 982,39 GB of data. Its content is organised in 19 alphabetical folders (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The top-level directory structure of the first Paquete
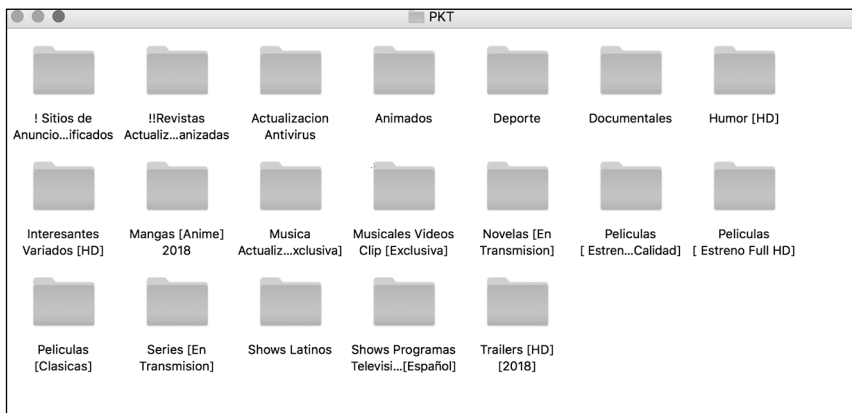
The second version I bought from Alvaro, a *Paquetero* who delivers to people's homes in the same district and who was one of my main research participants. This version consists of 47 folders that contain 17,672 files and make up 93,845 GB (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: The directory of the second Paquete
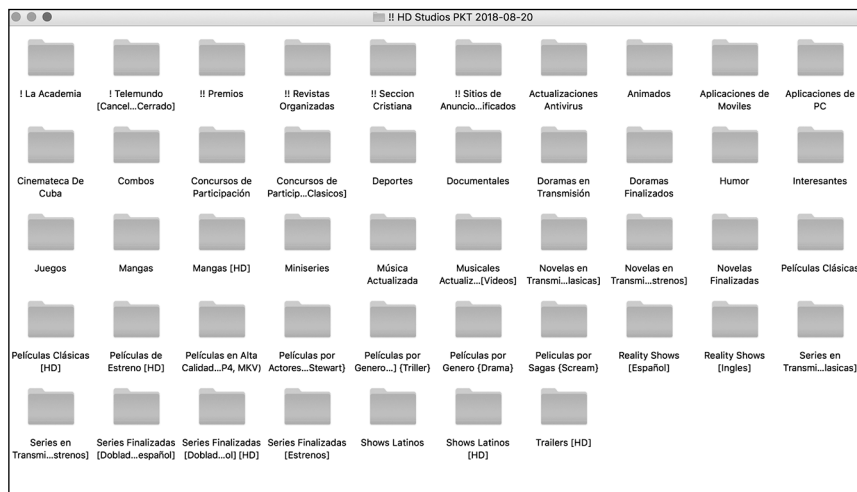
Both *Paquetes* were sold for the price of 2 CUC (Cuban Convertible Pesos, Cuba's second currency that is pegged to the US dollar). This price might seem quite high in a country where state employees (that still make up 80 percent of the nation's workforce) earn an average monthly salary of about 30 CUC (ONEI 2017). Yet, many Cubans do not solely depend on the official wages as they have found ways to create additional side incomes, either by joining the ranks of Cuba's *cuentapropistas*, or self-employed, or by receiving remittances from relatives abroad. Further, virtually all *El Paquete* users I interviewed either shared its cost among their friends or family members or obtained the whole package or parts of it from someone free of charge or in exchange for some other favour. *El Paquete* thus also circulates along established solidarity networks upon which Cubans have long relied in times of economic scarcity and to overcome the challenges of the island's socialist economy (cf. Pertierra 2011; Wilson 2013). Its highly decentralised and personal form of distribution hence secures its enormous penetration throughout the country while preventing individual distributors from making too much money with it. As entry barriers to the job are low and basically everyone with some USB sticks and hard drives can share data, competition is high. Most *Paqueteros* I interviewed therefore only distributed it as a side gig and very few had more than 20 regular paying customers.[2]

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2   The majority of the *Paqueteros* I worked with operate as tax-paying, self-employed *cuentapropistas* under an official "buyer and vendor of DVDs" license. Cuba's self-

Whereas I had to bring my own data storage device to the DVD shop (and collect it later that day) to buy the first *Paquete*, Alvaro lends his customers one of his eight hard drives for 24 h so they have time to decide which content they want to copy. Given the occasional watermark on a video and the information in the files' metadata, the first *Paquete* I obtained (that came in a single folder named "PKT") seemed to be largely based on the Omega edition while the second one from Alvaro (that came in a folder named "HD Studios PKT 2018-08-20") contained mainly material from the Odisea version. I compared the content of both *Paquetes* with the content lists of the Omega, Odisea and CrazyBoy releases that Leo, a computer science graduate, ex-*Paquetero*, and one of my research participants, uploads once a week on his website as a personal project. Through this comparison, I found that there was still a lot of material included in both collections that had other sources. The second *Paquete* for example, which was circulated by the intermediary distributor "HD Studios," featured the "Christian section" from CrazyBoy instead of the identically named one from Odisea, and both *Paquetes* further contained material that I could not clearly attribute to any of the main matrices. Upon systematically reviewing and coding all content, seven distinct categories emerged:

TV material. Under this rubric fall satellite dish capturings of recently aired US shows covering, for instance, sports events like boxing or wrestling matches (some shows were literally aired the night before the release of the *Paquete*), TV series like sitcoms and dramas from the United States (the predictable Netflix, HBO, Sky or Showtime material), as well as from Britain, Canada, Australia, Poland and Germany. Further, there is of course telenovelas from all over Latin America, Spain and Turkey, as well as an impressive amount of Korean soap operas (Doramas) and Japanese anime. These two genres have their own folders in the second *Paquete* that generally provides a much more nuanced directory as it distinguishes series from doramas, (tele-)novelas and reality shows and further differentiates between them being "premieres," "in transmission," "finished," "classics," or "dubbed in Spanish" – all this already in the top-level directory structure. Most subfolders for the individual series contain one to five successive episodes and, hence, just enough material to keep the customer entertained (but hopefully also "engachado" [hooked]) until next week's release. The *finalizadas* folder features full seasons of shows and thus invites for Netflix-style binge-viewing. The video files come in mpg or mp4 containers, usually in SD resolution. Foreign series are

employment sector was created in 2010, when the state laid off some 10 percent of its workforce and encouraged them to start their own enterprises (see Ritter and Henken 2015). Today, it encompasses around 600,000 people who run restaurants, repair shops or beauty parlours, rent out spare bedrooms in their homes or have turned private cars into taxis. The sector is highly regulated and currently recognizes 123 different professions for which licenses can be obtained (it is allowed to keep multiple work licences).

either dubbed or come with hard-coded subtitles or srt files. A great deal of this material is identical in both *Paquetes*, and in fact Lazaro, one Odisea employee I had the chance to speak to, suggested that the different matrices rely on the same content providers for a lot of the featured material.

Movies. Both *Paquetes* contain both documentaries and features, the latter chiefly from the US but also international (mostly low- to mid-brow) films. In both *Paquetes*, they come neatly organised with a movie poster jpeg and trailer to add to the Netflix feel. Often, the movie files have better image resolution than the TV shows. The second *Paquete* again offers more curation as it provides thematic folders in the top-level directory structure based on "genre" (in this case thriller), "actor" (Patrick Stewart gets a little five-film retrospective here) and "saga" (featuring the "Scream" series). Again, many of the recent films are identical in both *Paquetes*, yet the second *Paquete*, for example, further features a *Cinemateca de Cuba* folder that contains short and feature films, animation, documentaries and TV shows from the archives of governmental media production. This section has a very nostalgic feel to it as most content is from the 90s or early 2000s and it was predominantly an older audience that mentioned interest in this content during my semi-structured interviews with *Paquete* users.

Music. Music (mostly local Reggaeton, a genre not well regarded by the government media who continuously call out artists for promoting "dubious" moral values and have virtually banned it from their programming) is featured prominently in both *Paquetes* in the form of mp3 files and mp4 music videos. The second *Paquete* contains far more music (217.08 vs. 108.24 GB) yet some of these files are dating back to February. Most files carry the "Abdel La Esencia & Estudios Odisea" watermark. but there is also material with the label from another producer called "Hunter." Alvaro, the *Paquetero* from which I obtained the second *Paquete*, explained that he always maintains a strong focus on music as he has many restaurant owners among his clients who play music videos in the back-ground on TV sets to entertain their guests. For these, he prepares the data on a USB stick so that the files will auto-play directly after plugging in without the need for complicated folder navigation. The first *Paquete*, in contrast, has all its music section from the Omega matriz who team up with a promoter team called Eje Records to make their compilation. Here. both *Paquete* versions show the greatest differences, as music content is very much exclusive with the matrices. Rafael, a local Reggaeton musician, told me that promoters have their individual reputations. For unknown artists, they act as gatekeepers and many musicians pay them a fee to be included in the weekly selection as the *Paquete* is virtually the only form to promote and distribute contemporary music in Cuba. While Odisea relies on a well-known promoter and is considered the best *Paquete* for music among producers, Omega's curator team Eje Records tries to win ground by inviting audience participation and crowdsourcing the content selection. A readme txt file in the music folder urges customers to send music wishes and vote for next week's

Top 10 songs in national and international music (that are published every week in respective folders) via SMS to a mobile number.

Internet Content. The folders "Humor" and "Interesantes" that exist in both *Paquetes* feature various aspects of internet culture such as pet videos, "People are Awesome" compilations, Vines, video blogs on fitness, tech, or gaming, makeup tutorials and celebrity clips. Most of this material is downloaded from YouTube (except for a folder full of wallpapers). The first *Paquete* further includes a folder named "Farándula" (show business) hidden in one of the music folders that contains celebrity social media content downloaded as screenshots from Facebook and Instagram and promotional photos from Cuban musicians.

Software. Both *Paquetes* feature an impressive amount of pirated software such as video editing or graphics suites, games, antivirus protection and mobile phone applications that cannot be legally bought in Cuba. As, for example, both Apple's App Store and Google Play Store cannot be reached from the island due to the US embargo, *El Paquete* is one of the main sources for apps (and their updates) that increase a phone's functionality. A surprisingly large amount of apps further come from Cuban developers and are designed to function offline. AlaMesa, for instance, is a directory of local restaurants that comes with an interactive map, which uses the phone's GPS signal for location and thus does not require Wi-Fi connectivity. Cuban-made apps have further come to replace websites for local businesses, and *El Paquete* is therefore full of simple apps that merely display content (such as the portfolios of tattoo studios or photographers) or show items for sale. These apps do not usually allow for communication and switch over to the phone or SMS to connect the user to the business.

Advertisement. As all mass media are controlled by the state, and, according to the Constitution, cannot be used to facilitate capitalism, advertisement is technically banned in Cuba. Cuban state radio and TV programming is not interrupted by advertisements, and the few billboards in public space only display propagandistic edicts. *El Paquete* has therefore become one of the very few places where the growing class of Cuban small business owners (that the state prefers to call "self-employed" [*cuentapropista*] as this term suggests personal initiative rather than the acquisition of private property) can inform potential clients about their services. Besides the already mentioned music promotion and offline apps, both *Paquetes* contain several folders full of jpeg images with which restaurants, Quinceañera photographers or event organisers promote their services. A folder "Proximos Estrenos en Concierto [Nacional]" contains several dozen flyers for live gigs or club nights that are also only circulated digitally (I never saw printed flyers anywhere). Further, both *Paquetes* are full of promotional spots, usually just cascades of still images of products or services rhythmicised by an uptempo dance track that end with the businesses name, address and phone number. These promotion videos are either scattered across the TV show or movie folders as self-contained mp4 files or are inserted at the beginning or end of a file containing an actual movie/TV show. Already for some years, a few advertising agencies have existed in

Havana, such as ETRES or Highvista, which cooperate with matrices to offer their customers distribution through *El Paquete*. Highvista even allows clients to insert their own promotional folder with up to two GB of content into the Odisea edition, either in the top-level directory (with an exclamation mark in front of the name, so it will be listed upfront in the alphabetical folder registry) or, for a smaller fee, into the "Humor" or "Interesantes" folders.

Other. El Paquete further includes a variety of other offerings. The second *Paquete* for instance provides a Christian section, featuring Christian music, recordings of sermons and jpeg invitation flyers to religious events. It is produced by an evangelical group called Luz Visíon that actively seeks to use the *Paquete* for proselytisation. Both editions also contain independent Cuban journalism such as the pdf music and culture magazine Vistar, as well as the pdf editions or scans of Spanish and English language newspapers and magazines on various topics. Further, there is a classifieds section "Sitios de annuncios classificados" that comprises a set of rivalling platforms for classified advertisements (more on these later).

The Poetics of *El Paquete*

It is outright impossible to consume all the audiovisual content of *El Paquete* in one week's time. Yet a surprising amount of customers I spoke with still copy the whole package to their hard drive every week (and make space for it by deleting the previous one). One persisting topic that emerged in coding my interviews with *Paquete* users was a feeling of abundance that many interviewees described. What they particularly enjoyed about the *Paquete* was the seeming infinity of choices it offers. The 45-year-old Isabel for example feels that Cuban television programming is just too limited and that *El Paquete* allows her to see what she wants to see whenever she wants to. Whenever she hears about a new series or telenovela that was not included in her *Paquete*, her *Paquetero* would even go and find it for her and include it in next week's serving. Patricia, a 20-year-old cosplayer I first met during Havana's annual Otaku festival, stated that for her and her friends, the *Paquete* is the only access to the Korean and Japanese pop culture they so dearly cherish. Whereas she thinks that youth culture was completely underrepresented in Cuban television, *El Paquete* provides her both the knowledge about and the choice between a broad variety of international programming to stay up-to-date with what is happening in the world. Such an experience of choice and abundance stands in stark contrast to the everyday reality of Cubans, which is marked by the scarcity of consumer goods and the frequent lack of even the most basic things.

El Paquete's poetics, with its seemingly endless array of folders and subfolders on every imaginable topic, is thus one promoting choice, consumption and global connectedness. In a country where even grocery shopping requires lots of creativity, patience, dedication and time and individual consumer choice is hardly possible

because there is just not much to choose from, *El Paquete* provides a space where individuality can be expressed by means of consumption. *El Paquete* allows Cuban youth to become Otakus and devote their lives to Japanese pop culture. It permits fans of telenovelas to binge-watch their favourite shows without depending on state TV programming. And it enables music fans to listen to genres rejected as indecent and not aired by the government media. As it gives a large amount of people such unrestricted access to a plethora of cultural forms (and further confronts them with lots of advertising), *El Paquete* fosters a social imaginary that allows its users to experience themselves as members of a global media audience and consumer culture and to dream themselves away from the hardships of their economic realities. And, as I will show in the next section, it further mobilizes such desires and aspirations by providing actual real economic opportunities, for instance by supplying a multi-level platform for market activities such as PR and e-commerce and the independent publication of media content.

El Paquete as a communicative assemblage

While *El Paquete* is a massive collection of digital material, its users are not limited to the mere passive viewing of content. Various sections of *El Paquete* act as independent content-sharing platforms with rudimentary Web 2.0 elements. An important weekly offering for example is the many competing classifieds platforms that allow the buying and sale of everything from electronic equipment such as computers, phones or TVs, to cars and motorcycles, to furniture, clothing, sex toys and pets. Revolico, the most famous of these services, has existed since 2007 and, while its online presence has repeatedly been blocked by the government from inside Cuba, it has been distributed as an offline archive file for years in the *Paquete*. The social impact of this platform, which has single-handedly created a huge digital black market facilitating Cubans' access to imported consumer products, can hardly be overestimated (Kirk 2015). Recently, however, many technically more advanced rivalling services such as Popular, 1CUC or the phone app La Chopi have popped up. Whereas Revolico's offline version in the *Paquete* is "read-only," as advertisements still have to be published online, Popular is a *Paquete*-native platform that allows users to "post" a classified advertisement in *El Paquete* by texting their offer to a mobile number. Their advertisement will then appear as a jpeg graphic in a standardised layout (with additional advertisement next to it) in *El Paquete*'s next week edition. Offers in the Popular folder are organised in an elaborate directory tree (e. g. > Computadoras > HHD-SSD-Flash) that allows for easy search and navigation (see Fig. 3). Besides facilitating collaborative consumption, *El Paquete* further allows Cuban content creators to reach a local audience. It displays local advertising, forms an outlet for the distribution of independent magazines and provides a video-sharing platform for Cuban vloggers and musicians. Content creators have access to *El Paquete*'s distribution

network via the various promoters who curate certain parts of it (and who leave their contact info in jpeg or txt files in the folders they are in charge of), or through advertising agencies who cooperate with the matrices.

Fig. 3: A jpeg advertisement for data rescue services in the "Popular" folder

The majority of Cuban video bloggers I interviewed opt for additional offline distribution through *El Paquete* because the limited internet access in Cuba does not really allow their potential audiences to carelessly waste precious online time on YouTube. They usually pay two CUC per video or ten CUC as a monthly flatrate to *El Paquete* promoters to be included in the selection. In order to receive audience feedback, they display their mobile numbers at the end of their videos and ask their followers to send them text messages, thus making up for an online video-sharing platform's like or comment options. While some of them found it frustrating to not have access to the statistical information on audience engagement that YouTube offers, others felt that the amount of text messages they receive and the many instances of being recognised on the street were a good sign that the *El Paquete* distribution worked for them. Yet what virtually every content creator I spoke to problematised was the constant deformation of content throughout its twisted distribution channels. While he was generally content with the outreach *El Paquete* generated for him, Ernesto, a 17-year-old vlogger based in Alamar, on the Eastern outskirts of Havana, complained that his videos never made it to his particular neighbourhood as local *Paqueteros* kept dropping his videos for other material. In this file system-based network where every participant can easily replace content or change file or folder names, many producers have begun to at least mark the more persisting metadata such as embedded album art or id3 tags with their logo. In a similar vein, the producers of the Christian section, Luz Visíon, explained that they were planning to add watermarks to their self-produced content as they often found that their folder had reached the Cuban inland full of

other material such as mundane advertisement. Such product customisation that interferes with the content creators' outreach possibilities is something all *Paqueteros* I met with stated doing. They either try to cater to their customers' individual preferences or they modify *El Paquete* according to their own personal tastes and values. Alejandro for instance always deletes the Christian section right away as he considers himself an atheist and knows that his clients do not care about this content either. Many *Paqueteros* also break with the idea of a weekly update and keep larger parts of older editions on the hard drive as customers often ask for content that were in the collection weeks ago. Alvaro, for example, tries to keep the most popular series available for a longer period of time, but as he only has limited data storage space at home he just leaves older episodes on the one TB hard drives he distributes every week among his customers.

Its networked dimensions, fluid form and platform characteristics turn *El Paquete* into something much more complex than the static collection of digital content as which it is usually described. I therefore propose to understand *El Paquete* as a "communicative assemblage" (Slater 2013), a complex interdependency of infrastructural, technological and social elements. Far from only existing as an assortment of folders full of data, *El Paquete* in equal ways consists of the infrastructural legwork performed by *Paqueteros*, the technical arrangement of computers, hard drives and USB sticks needed for copying the content, and social connections such as the trusting relationships between *Paqueteros* and their clients, black market traders and their customers or independent content producers and their audiences. *El Paquete* is in fact so much born out of particular local necessities, so much shaped by a Cuban culture of problem solving and inventiveness, and so much built upon Cuban social values of solidarity and redistribution that it cannot be understood without its social context. To further analyse *El Paquete*'s local impact and importance, I will now detail its role within the wider Cuban communicative ecology that is still heavily shaped by the state and its official media. I argue that *El Paquete*'s highly flexible and participatory form and the relative power it grants individual actors to add to, change or manipulate the material in circulation put it into direct competition with the government media outlets that hitherto controlled the national distribution of all media content. For the first time in decades, groups like evangelical churches, journalists, video bloggers or musicians now have not only the technical means to produce audiovisual content at their disposal but also the infrastructure to circulate it throughout the island, allowing them to bypass the state media channels that refuse to provide them a space. In the next section, I am therefore going to describe the government's reaction to *El Paquete* and will unravel the network's complex and contradictory relationship to the Cuban state.

The Politics of *El Paquete*: *El Paquete* and the State

By facilitating a black market for hard-to-access consumer items and by offering Cuban media producers a platform to publish their content, *El Paquete* provides an alternative to the government-run supply chain of consumer products and the programming of the state-controlled media stations. While this in many ways challenges the government's historic promise to exclusively take care of every possible social need, the *matrices* seek to avoid getting into any direct conflict with the state by actively censoring pornographic or overtly political material and insisting that they only provide harmless entertainment. This self-censorship is based on a handful of unwritten rules and is thus a kind of "gentlemen's agreement" on the community level of *matrices* and the *Paqueteros* that work for them. It is generally accepted by their customers whose priority is on accessing the content and who do not want to face backlash by the government and potentially risk losing access to the content.

Some of the *Paqueteros* I asked about the authorities' silent acceptance of *El Paquete* sarcastically commented that it actually serves them as an opiate for the masses by keeping the populace entertained and distracted. The state's relatively liberal position, however, has also to be understood in the light of the broader economic and social reforms that have been implemented by the then-president Raúl Castro since 2010. These include large state worker layoffs, cuts in social spending and a great enlargement of the private sector (for which *El Paquete* is, as I have shown, a highly relevant distribution and communication platform). These reforms have promoted self-employment, market-mediated relations such as the expanded legalisation of sale and purchase between individuals as well as a hesitant opening to world markets (Mesa-Lago & Pérez López 2013; Ritter & Henken 2015; Feinberg 2016). They are, however, not limited to the steady introduction of "more market mechanisms" but also have profound implications for politics and society as they redefine the roles of state institutions, economic actors and the citizenry at large. As Hoffmann (2016) shows, they have granted Cuban citizens greater autonomy, liberalised travel and migration and allowed for a gradual diversification of the public sphere.

As *El Paquete* is not officially prohibited but also not officially recognised, it remains in an extra-legal limbo. While Cuba's new president Miguel Díaz-Canel has stated in interviews that he is not against *El Paquete* as an idea, he repeatedly criticised the values it transports and the cultural behaviour it nurtures. In some instances, the state has also publicly drawn red lines. When in July 2018 an episode of the US telenovela *El Señor de los Cielos* (produced by the American Spanish language network Telemundo) presented Raúl Castro and General Ramiro Valdés as the main drug traffickers in the Caribbean region, the authorities issued a warning to the main *casas matrices* about the risk they run if they continue to distribute audiovisual material that goes against the principles of the revolution. Odisea therefore circulated a public statement (in form of a txt file) in

Fig. 4: The Mochila interface

their *Paquete* explaining that they would stop including the "disrespectful" series. Omega, in contrast, took a different path and published a note to its users clarifying that they had edited out the problematic scenes and would thus be releasing a version without offensive content. This incident however also clearly showed the limits of the state's reach. While *El Paquete*'s main production houses all played by the rules, many *Paqueteros* still found access to the questionable episode and it soon became available on the streets and in neighbourhood stores for those who wanted to see it.

As an effectively decentralised network, *El Paquete* is virtually impossible to control, and as it obviously meets some real demands of the Cuban citizens, the state has recently shifted its stance towards the *Paquete* and now actively tries to compete with it by publishing its own official weekly alternative. This data collection, which is called *Mochila* (backpack), can be copied for a small fee in Government cybercafés and *joven* computer clubs. In order to compare it with the informal *Paquete*, I copied the version from Monday, 20 August (numbered its 84th edition as the service started in early 2017). *Mochila* is organised in 14 folders whereof the one called "Catalogo" serves as a directory offering pdfs with extensive description of all included content (see Fig. 4). One folder (that is brought to the fore by an exclamation mark), "! Proyecto de Constitucíon Cubana" provides a plethora of resources on the process of revising the Cuban constitution, which was then underway (the new constitution was subject to a national referendum in February

2019). Other folders contain further official state information as well as propaganda of the sort one finds in the national press and television. The "Educacíon para todos" folder, for example, features the educational software collections "El Navegante" and "Multisaber," exercises to help students prepare for the national college entrance exams, but also pdfs with poetry by the national hero José Martí or the reflections of Fidel Castro. "Estanquillo" comprises digital copies of Cuba's national newspapers, a Fidel photo collection and juridical texts and discourses. In the folder "De mi terruño," one can find productions of regional television and community telecentres throughout the island, thus giving visibility to programs from outside the capital. A folder called "Amigos" functions like an offline newsletter or social network. In several Word documents, one can leave one's contact info and feedback or suggestions on what should be included in future editions (e. g. "more traditional Cuban music") or one can search for new friends.

Other text documents contain collected emails received by the *Mochila* curatorial team. The folder "Súmate" comprises invitations to various events such as art or poetry competitions or even a selfie contest. Interestingly, other parts of *Mochila* are almost indistinguishable from the street-distributed original. The folders "A jugar" and "Aplicaciones" basically offer the same mix of video games, software and mobile phone applications that is featured in *El Paquete*. Further, "Utilisimo" contains a similar mix of web tutorials on make-up, cooking or fitness, and *Mochila*'s selection of telenovelas and Korean doramas is almost identical to the one in its predecessor.[3] *El Señor de los Cielo*s, for instance, was also regularly featured in *Mochila* (and disappeared rather silently once the authorities became unhappy with its content).

El Paquete is not the only private initiative the government tries to copy. With Ofertas, a website launched in 2015 that is also accessible from within the Cuban intranet,[4] it also has created a state-sanctioned alternative to the digital marketplaces like Popular and Revolico that are hosted in *El Paquete*. Yet whereas a lot of the items sold on these platforms stem from technically illegal networks of traders that have been created to import and sell all kinds of consumer goods, Ofertas is managed and controlled by the state institution *Agencia Cubana de Noticias* whose team of moderators reviews each advertisement and rejects offers outside

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3   As is the case with *El Paquete,* all foreign material in *Mochila* is pirated and has not been licensed from the respective right-holders as the Cuban state considers copyright anti-revolutionary (Lobato 2014: 128).

4   Cuba's state-controlled nationwide intranet offers services such as the health portal Infomed, a nationwide e-mail provider as well as politically sanitized national adaptations of popular internet services like Wikipedia (EcuRed) or the blogging community WordPress (Reflejos). With a price of currently 0.10 CUC access to the limited national intranet is much cheaper than access to the global internet for which one hour scratch cards are currently sold by the state-owned internet provider Nauta for one CUC.

of private petty trade and the established legal framework of licenses given to self-employed workers. While Ofertas thus does not endorse black market activities, both its website and its printed version sell advertisement space to private companies, making it the Cuban authorities' first time ever foray into advertising practices. With the launch of *Mochila* and Ofertas and the noticeable shift to more international entertainment programming in the official TV stations, the state seemingly attempts to regain control over the private sector by assimilating to it as much as possible. By tolerating the emergence of private initiatives "from below" such as *El Paquete*, the Cuban state is letting go of its former media monopoly and becomes one mere voice in a much more diversified communicative ecology. By creating official alternatives to these initiatives instead of regulating them, the state is ultimately drawn into a capitalist logic, namely that of the competitive market. In the competition for people's attention, the state apparently sees itself forced to use capitalist forms like foreign entertainment or advertising in order to keep at least some of its relevance in certain sectors. The state itself is therefore more or less participating in the materialist cultural behaviour president Díaz-Canel accused *El Paquete* of promoting.

While *El Paquete* in many ways allows people to move away from depending on the state by allowing them to become individual consumers or even producers, it also plays its role in the re-emergence of social inequalities that accompany the state's withdrawal from its erstwhile omnipresence. Participation in the peer-to-peer economy of Revolico and Popular, access to the technical means to produce one's own media content, running a small business to advertise, all this is only possible with the financial, material and social capital that is accumulating predominantly with phenotypically white Cubans who are more likely to have remittance-sending relatives in the United States.[5] Such offline capital carries over to the online world and may add up to cumulative advantage (cf. DiMaggio & Garip 2012). Hansing (2017) describes how the new Cuban economy of which *El Paquete* is part and parcel thus leads to new social stratifications along clearly visible racial lines. Therefore, *El Paquete* not only socialises access to online data and diversifies the public sphere, it also advances a capitalist logic that the socialist state is not offering any opposition against. This dualism between socialist and capitalist concepts of the network as a site for sharing and collaboration versus the unbridled generation of profits in market exchanges is a conflict that is all-too familiar to Western observers: it haunts our perspectives on the internet as well.

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5   As the first wave of emigrants after the revolution consisted overwhelmingly of members of the white elite and the bourgeoise, the Cuban diaspora today is considerably "whiter" than the population on the island.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that *El Paquete Semanal* is a much more complex network than usually reported. Far from only distributing foreign entertainment, it also serves as a participatory platform for local media publishing and digital market activities, thus expanding individuals' agency in the country's communicative ecology. As an informal, vernacular infrastructure, it makes up for the various restrictions on sharing and consuming digital content. Hence, it helps Cubans bridge inequalities of access between their country and much of the rest of the world that are the result of various government policies, lack of infrastructure and the US trade embargo. *El Paquete*'s poetics is one of affluence and abundance, offering consumer choices in an economy that usually denies them. Therefore, the symbolic meaning of *El Paquete* is that it emerges out of and promotes forms of desire and fantasy directed towards capitalist consumption, free markets and connectedness with the wider world. *El Paquete* benefits from, and in turn facilitates, the economic and social liberalisation currently underway in Cuba. The Cuban state somewhat helplessly reacts to this private initiative by offering state-sanctioned alternatives that only draw it deeper into the logics of capitalist competition. *El Paquete* thus embodies the ambivalence and contradictions of Cuba's current transformation: While it lifts some of the access restrictions for a broad majority of people, not everyone can capitalise on the entrepreneurship and consumption opportunities made available by its "peer-to-peer" economy. In this regard, *El Paquete* also fosters new digital inequalities that divide the (still comparatively egalitarian) Cuban society and that are intricately linked to long-standing forms of inequality such as race and socio-economic status (Robinson et al. 2015). On the one hand, *El Paquete* communises the availability of global media and information for the many, but on the other, it particularly serves those who have the means to participate in the private market and who benefit from increased market exchanges.

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