

Havana as a 1940s-1950s Latin American Media Capital

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This essay examines the Cuban broadcasting industry's prominent position in the 1940s and 1950s Latin American media landscape by analyzing the transformations of Havana-based radio and television and the media exchanges between Cuba, the U.S., and Latin America. The author pays special attention to the ways in which the concentration of creative talent in Havana, in addition to industrial, legal, economic, and cultural factors, fostered the growth of Cuba's commercial broadcasting. In addition, the essay traces Havana media connections across the region and conflictive economic, industrial, and political moments that provoked the migration of Cuban media professionals to various Latin American countries before the 1959 Cuban revolution. The project argues that during the 1940s and 1950s Havana was one of the most important commercial broadcasting centers in the region, which facilitated the incorporation of Cuban exiles into the Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language media workforce during the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords: Cuban Commercial Television; Media Capital; Regional Media Exchanges; Latin American Television History

In the summer of 1961 Martin Codel, a well known U.S. journalist and editor of the trade magazines *Broadcasting Magazine* and *Television Digest*, was preparing for one of his first trips to Latin America as a consultant for Time-Life, Inc. Interested in establishing radio and television businesses across the region, Time-Life hired Codel to develop relationships with local media entrepreneurs and recommend investment opportunities. As several scholars have documented, throughout the 1960s Time-Life invested in broadcasting industries in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Sinclair, 1999). Codel's extensive research on Latin American media industries was part of Time-Life's initial business strategy. However, what is

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particularly intriguing about Codel's memos is the ongoing presence of Cuban television professionals. Even though, as expected, post-revolutionary Cuba was not included in Time-Life's transnational plans, numerous migrants from Cuba, including Diego Cisneros (founder of Venezuela's network Venevisión), Goar Mestre (who, in conjunction with CBS, launched one of the most important commercial channels in Argentina), Gaspar Pumarejo (who worked as a television producer in Peru and Puerto Rico), and others generally referred to as "Cuban exiles" populate Codel's folders on Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela (Codel's papers, 1920–1971).

Martin Codel's documents confirmed something that I had become keenly aware of through my previous research on Puerto Rican commercial television: Cuba's centrality in the "geo-linguistic" mediascape of the 1940s and 1950s.¹ To be sure, some of the literature on Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language television references the Cuban influence across the region. For example, when discussing *telenovelas*, Jesús Martín Barbero (1993), Ana López (1995), Nora Mazziotti (1995, 1996), and Andrew Paxman (2003) situate the beginning of commercial *radionovelas* and *telenovelas* in Cuba. Additionally, the Cuban impact is briefly cited in the literature on the development of television in Brazil and Venezuela. Still, these references to Cuba relate primarily to the origins of *radionovelas* and the post-1959 exodus of Cuban media professionals. With the significant exceptions of Arlene Dávila's (2001) *Latinos Inc.* and Mirta Varela's (2005) *La Televisión Criolla*, the Cuban presence in the Americas is summarized in single sentences such as, "Conventional wisdom within Latin America locates the novela's origins in Cuba, specifically in the pre-war radio industry" (Paxman, 2003, p. 9) and "Globo attracted creative talent, notably Gloria Madagan, who brought to Globo her experience in making *telenovelas* for Colgate-Palmolive in Cuba" (Vink, 1998, paraphrased in Sinclair, 1999, p. 65).

These fleeting allusions to Cuban television not only present a fragmented depiction of the region's television past but they construct the past through the lens of the Latin American television present. In an attempt to explain the internationalization of the region before, as Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (2002, p. 1) write, "globalization became a buzzword," scholars who mention Cuba have focused on what are presently considered important television products (*telenovelas*) and markets (Brazil and Mexico). As a result, absent from the narrative are 1950s prime-time genres such as variety shows and comedies, which were at least as popular as *telenovelas*, as well as the owners, executives (producers and advertising agents), technical staff (camera men, lighting designers, and sound technicians, among others), and creative personnel (directors, scriptwriters, and performers) who helped build broadcasting industries across the region.

In this essay I re-evaluate the pre-1959 Cuban broadcasting era and analyze the multilevel media exchanges and liaisons between Cuba, the U.S., and Latin America. The main argument guiding this research is that from the mid 1940s to 1958 Havana was one of the most important centers—perhaps the most important center—of commercial radio and television production in Latin America. By adapting the U.S. broadcasting system in terms of production, programming, and advertising practices,

and by gathering a workforce that mastered the technical, business, and creative aspects of radio and television, Havana's broadcasting industries became the commercial model for the region.

As I elaborate in the following pages, Havana's regional media status was obtained through its broadcasting industry's technical, advertising, and creative developments, and through the dispersion of cultural artifacts, executives, technical staff, and creative personnel across Latin America. Although in many cases these dispersions throughout Latin America were a result of U.S. corporations' self-serving interests, in many other instances the movements were a product of the lack of local human resources to launch or develop the technical and creative aspects of commercial radio and television. In addition, Cuban media professionals' migrations responded to internal national and industrial factors that were not tied to the U.S. Consequently, even though U.S. capitalistic investments played a key role in the development of Cuba's broadcasting industries, a range of economic, political, social, and industrial factors coalesced to prompt the movement of Cuban executives, technical staff, creative personnel, and cultural products throughout Latin America before the 1960s exodus. These pre-revolutionary dispersions, connections, and reconnections, together with the legal, cultural, and commercial particularities of specific geolinguistic broadcasting and advertising industries (see, e.g., Dávila, 2001; Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Rivero, 2005; Rodríguez, 1989; Sinclair, 1999, 2003; Varela, 2005), facilitated the incorporation of Cubans into the Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language media industries during the 1960s and 1970s.²

My analysis of the multilevel media links and flows between Cuba, the U.S., and much of Latin America is influenced by Michael Curtin's concept of *media capital*. In his most recent work, Curtin attempts to expand the analysis of global media exchanges and the centrality of particular cities in the production and export of film and television products. Arguing that most interpretations of global media flows center on the relationship between film and broadcasting industries and the nation-state, Curtin proposes a new analytical framework in which scholars would consider "the web of relations that exist at the local, regional, and global levels, as well as the national level" (Curtin, 2003, p. 204). In examining what he categorizes as media capitals—that is, cities that have become important sites of media production—researchers could pay attention to "the spatial logics of capital, creativity, culture, and polity" without favoring any of these factors (Curtin, 2007, p. 23). According to Curtin, close exploration of the "logics of accumulation" (the tactics of redistributing creative resources, expanding operations, and selecting strategic locations), the "trajectories of creative migration" (attracting talent to a particular place), and the "forces of socio-cultural variation" (the influence of local political, legal, and cultural elements) provides a space to analyze the emergence, development, and demise of media capitals (*ibid.*, pp. 10–22). At the same time, the evaluation of these diverse yet sometimes interrelated processes circumvents interpretations that situate power in static and/or binary relations (for instance, local elites' economic and/or political control vs. citizens' oppression, or colonial/neocolonial subordination vs. lack of local agency).

Although Curtin utilizes his concept of media capital to assess the emergence of East Asian cities as contemporary centers of film and television production and export, his model also allows for a re-evaluation of the Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language television past and present. In the case of Havana's 1940s–1950s Latin American media capital status, this reinterpretation would build on the “process of sentimental integration” that, as Jesús Martín Barbero (1995, p. 283) writes, characterized the region's media and popular culture. In other words, by analyzing Havana and its media professionals' connections with Latin American cultural industries, we can provide a more detailed examination of how the marriage between capital, markets, and vernacular cultures, in addition to the flows of people and media artifacts, helped foster a shared popular culture space. Furthermore, this reassessment could complicate political-economic analyses of Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language television that, for the most part, do not take into account national and transnational socio-cultural factors that affect television industries and their executive, technical, and creative workforce. Thus, through a focus on 1940s–1950s Cuba, this project also attempts to expand Curtin's conceptualization of media capital by suggesting that the movements of media professionals from a particular broadcasting center to other regional media hubs should be considered in the investigation and conceptualization of media capitals.

Drawing from stories published in the Cuban newspaper *Diario de la Marina*, the magazines *Carteles*, *Bohemia*, *Gente de la Semana*, and *Vanidades*, the broadcasting laws available in the *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba*, *New York Times* articles, and Martín Codel's papers, in this project I analyze the formation and demise of Havana as a Latin American media capital. I begin with an overview of particular historical conditions during the 1940s that prompted Havana's national and regional media prominence. As part of this discussion I pay special attention to the ways in which the concentration of creative talent, in addition to industrial, legal, economic, and cultural factors, influenced the maturity of Cuban commercial radio and television. I then move to an examination of Havana media connections across the region and conflictive economic, industrial, and political moments that provoked the migration of Cuban television professionals to various Latin American countries before the 1959 Cuban revolution. I conclude the essay by foregrounding the scholarly need to reassess the Cuban influence before and after 1959, as well as the business, cultural, and creative exchanges that helped define past and contemporary Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language media capitals.

The Emergence of Havana as a Media Capital

The 1940s in Cuba was a decade of democratic hope, relative economic stability, and intellectual and cultural effervescence. What has been described as a “remarkably progressive constitution” was established in 1940 offering Cubans, among other things, “a wide range of political and civil liberties” (Pérez, 1995, p. 281). The Cuban economy—which, as in previous decades, relied primarily on the sugar cane industry and was constrained by the nation's economic dependence on the U.S.—expanded

during and after World War II. Although this economic prosperity did not benefit equally all sectors of the population or all regions, by 1950 Cuba was ranked one of the most economically developed countries in Latin America (Farber, 2006, p. 7; also see Pérez, 1995, pp. 283–288). In the cultural terrain, a new group of literary figures emerged and formed what would later be called “the second republican generation,” the number of formally trained musicians coming from different sectors of the population increased, popular musical groups flourished locally and internationally, and, from the early 1940s, theatre aficionados had the opportunity to obtain a formal education at the Drama Conservatory and at the University of Havana (Birkenmaier, 2004; Díaz Ayala, 2003; Lemogodeuc, 1994; Moore, 2006). Due to newly established educational venues and a variety of professional possibilities that, as I explain below, included changes in the commercial radio industry, the city of Havana became the national capital of popular culture (Kapcia, 2005; Lemogodeuc, 1994).

While the 1940s suggested a new political, social, economic, and cultural moment in Cuban history, at the same time political corruption, perceptions of moral decay, and a sense of uncertainty began to dominate the first years of Cuba’s democracy. As historian Louis Pérez (1995, p. 284) writes, “Politics passed under the control of party thugs, and a new word entered the Cuban political lexicon: *gangsterismo*.” As *gangsterismo*—violence, terror, and corruption—spread across the nation, Havana became the epicenter of decay. Havana’s decadence not only involved political abuses of power but also the materialization of illegal activities associated with U.S. mobsters’ investments (particularly in the casino industry), the expansion of sex and drug trafficking, and an increase in criminal activity, all of which exploded during the 1950s (Segre, Coyula, & Scarpaci, 2002).

Havana in the 1940s, then, embodied both the promise of utopia and the threat of dystopia. This decade was a period in which the city was imagined and experienced by some as a location of democracy, economic abundance, socio-cultural modernization, and creative vision. Concomitantly, the city was experienced and imagined by others as a node of corruption, organized crime, poverty, and excess. Whereas these two imaginings and realities collided in the 1950s when the nation moved from democracy to dictatorship (by way of Fulgencio Batista’s March 10, 1952, military coup), when Cuba’s economy began down the path to total collapse, and when the lines between illegal and legal became less distinguishable, the 1940s was a decade of diverse and sometimes conflicting possibilities. It is precisely in this contradictory temporal place that Havana surfaced as a media capital. The fusion of creative talent, the city’s economic wealth, and the existence of a financially solvent middle and upper class audience influenced the development of Cuban commercial radio and in the early 1950s the exponential growth of the television industry.

In addition to the aforementioned national and local circumstances, particular industrial and commercial factors—directly and indirectly related to the long-established U.S. political and economic interventions in Cuba—came together to position Havana as a broadcasting hub. The early investments of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, Cuban media professionals’ training in and mastership of U.S. advertising techniques, and the appropriation of U.S. radio

production practices facilitated the maturity of Cuba's broadcasting industries (Díaz Ayala, 2003; López, 1998). Furthermore, international treaties such as the 1950 North American Regional Broadcasting Agreement (NARBA), which gave Cuba the rights to the majority of channels outside the U.S., also hastened media expansion ("International Air Waves," 1951; "To Regulate Broadcasting," 1951). However, of all of these U.S. influences, the advertising experience of Cubans was instrumental in cementing Havana's status as a Latin American media capital.

Cubans' expertise in advertising resulted from the introduction of U.S. agencies into Cuba in the early twentieth century. This incursion of U.S. advertising agencies, as Louis Pérez notes, intertwined the practice of consumption with ideologies of modernity and civilization (Pérez, 1999, p. 132). Besides incorporating the "American way of (consumer) life" into Cuban society, U.S. advertising agencies on the island created a cadre of advertisers who, after studying in the U.S. or at Havana's *Escuela de Publicidad* (School of Advertising) or working in U.S.-Cuban advertising affiliates or local independent agencies, were trained to adapt U.S. advertising strategies to the Cuban and Latin American economic and cultural milieu (López, 1998, p. 255; also see Dávila, 2001, pp. 24–32).

The formal education of advertisers that began to take place in the 1940s coincided with industrial changes in Cuban commercial radio. In this decade, Havana-based radio networks displaced small stations across the territory, expediting the national centrality of Havana's broadcasting industries (Díaz Ayala, 2003, p. 201). Additionally, during the 1940s Cuban radio attained a high level of professionalism. According to Cuban radio historian Oscar Luis López (1998), this professional phase was reached by the combination of music, fiction, and news shows in daily programming, by way of hiring established and promising talent (e.g., actors, musicians, and scriptwriters), and by clearly defining administrative jobs by title and salary (1998, p. 205). As López (1998) writes, "[T]he most advanced methods of the North American commercial radio system were applied in Cuba with the necessary variations that adjusted it to an economically reduced medium" (p. 92). Thus, in this period, Cubans took the direct approach of indigenizing U.S. production practices by accommodating the U.S. broadcasting model to Cuba's economic, technical, and cultural realities.

Another area that fostered transformations in Cuban commercial radio, and also influenced the professionalism described by López (1998), was the institutionalization of new broadcasting laws. In 1942 the Cuban government crafted specific regulations for the technical, commercial, and cultural components of radio broadcasting. In a departure from the 1939 broadcasting law, which included twenty-three articles couched in vague language, the 1942 law encompassed forty articles that explicitly regulated the commercial radio industry.³ These new regulations defined what constituted commercial radio stations, prohibited radio owners from hiring announcers who were not accredited by the Minister of Communication, and required radio owners to have their entire programming schedule prepared and submitted to the government radio office at least five days prior to its intended transmission. Furthermore, the 1942 law transformed previous programming categorizations and specified who could participate in these shows and

the amount of advertising that could be incorporated into national networks and regional stations on a weekly basis.

Through the establishment of the 1942 radio laws, the Cuban state both lessened the possibility of public service broadcasting and solidified the commercial system that would define the island's radio and television until 1960. Law, as media scholar Thomas Streeter (1996) writes regarding U.S. broadcasting policy, "is not just an occasional constraint on the behavior of broadcasting, it *creates* broadcasting" (p. 8). To appease the demands of "different sectors of public opinion" for more educational, cultural, and closely regulated radio, the 1942 rules instituted the categorization of informative programming and paved the way for state intervention without compromising the privatized, advertiser-run system (Batista, Saladrigas, and López Blanco, 1942, p. 1355). Interconnecting democracy, capitalism, and professionalism, the 1942 laws were intended to promote a structured, advanced, and thus modern broadcasting system.

Ideas about modernity also strongly influenced the transformations in Cuban commercial radio and the birth and development of 1950s television. Cubans, especially those in privileged positions, viewed their country and themselves as modern. This notion of modernity, as several scholars have argued, was infused by Cuba's immersion into the U.S. market economy and consumer culture (Kapcia, 2005; Pérez, 1999). However, more than an external influence, the discourse of Cuban modernity needs to be construed as an integral component in what Louis Pérez (1999) calls the "narrative on nationality." As Pérez notes:

That the material basis of these claims [modernity and civilization] originated principally in the United States seemed to matter little, if at all. Cubans had become conversant with advanced technologies, new manufacturing techniques, and new communication systems. Modernity could thus be claimed as Cuban and each advance served to reaffirm Cuba's place in this order. (p. 348)

Certainly, one should be cautious about broad and essentialist generalizations of Cuban modernity, particularly if one considers class and regional differences. That said, in the context of Havana, and concerning commercial broadcasting industries, Cubans' imagining of themselves as modern was highly influential. The nationalistic urge constantly to reposition Cuba as part of the modern world played an important role in Cuban radio and television's technological advancements.

In sum, a cluster of historically situated political, economic, industrial, legal, and cultural factors came together to transform Havana into a media capital. The U.S. was an undeniable force in Cuba's broadcasting expansion. However, in addition to the U.S., a multiplicity of national and local circumstances contributed to the development of Havana's media industries.

Regarding the institutionalization of commercial television in Latin America and its relation to radio, to the creation of a mass audience, and to U.S. hegemony, Jesús Martín Barbero (1993) contends that "what most influenced Latin America was the importation of the North American model of television" (p. 180). I would like to push this argument further and offer three new interpretations.

First, in the case of Cuba, the importation of the U.S. broadcasting model dates back to the radio era. Through the consolidation of networks in Havana, the introduction of new U.S.-imprinted production practices, the formal training of advertisers, and the establishment of laws that demarcated the commercial system, the 1940s set the stage for the North American model of television. Therefore, and paraphrasing Martín Barbero's words, what most influenced Cuba was the 1940s indigenization of elements associated with the business, legal, production, and creative aspects of U.S. broadcasting.

Second, as a result of this earlier appropriation, Cuban television became a successful adaptation of the U.S. commercial television system. For many 1950s media professionals, the Cuban medium symbolized the technological, cultural, and commercial possibilities of a highly complex and expensive business enterprise. As I elaborate in the next section, Havana-based television practitioners were considered the experts in Latin America.

Lastly, and interrelated, in particular cases, Latin American television was not directly impacted by the North American model of television, but instead was more closely tied to the already adapted Cuban version of that model. From the 1940s, Cuban radio and advertising entrepreneur Goar Mestre and Mexican media mogul Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta envisioned the business possibilities of commercial television in Latin America. Together and in conjunction with U.S. networks, Mestre and Azcárraga Vidaurreta lobbied for the incorporation of the "American" [television] model rather than a 'European' state-operated basis" (Sinclair, 1999, p. 13). However, even though both entrepreneurs foresaw profitable businesses in their countries and across the region, Cuba's economic prosperity during WWII, Havana's popular culture explosion, and the island's political-economic ties with the U.S. prompted Havana's broadcasting influence throughout Latin America. As Azcárraga Vidaurreta stated in 1955, "[W]hat we have done in Mexico has been matched or surpassed in Cuba. We believe that Cuba's and Mexico's television should be the schools for Latin America" (Azcárraga Vidaurreta, 1955, quoted in Hernández Lomelí, 1996, p. 152). Azcárraga Vidaurreta's vision of Mexican television becoming "the school for Latin America" would not be realized until approximately two decades later with the Azcárraga family's network Televisa and their investments in the U.S. Spanish-language television market. Mestre and Cuban media professionals, on the other hand, penetrated the Latin American radio and television industry during the 1940s and 1950s. Through the export of scripts, advertisers, scriptwriters, producers, and technical staff, Cuban cultural artifacts and people became key pieces and players in the creation of a trans-Latin American and Spanish Caribbean commercial cultural space of production and consumption (Martín Barbero, 1995).

The Havana Connections: Capital, Opportunities, and Crises

The Havana broadcasting influence in Latin America first came into place through the sale of scripts and the transfer of advertisers. The 1940s export of Cuban scripts across the region was, in many cases, connected to U.S. corporate investments. With

the objective of expanding its market reach across Latin America, companies such as Procter and Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive created alliances with Havana-based businesses to produce radio programming for the region. Through this process, Cuba became one of the most important centers of radio programming and scriptwriting for Latin America. While not all Cuban agencies were affiliated with U.S. industries, those that were became part of transnational business and creative nets. For example, the Cuban corporation Sabatés affiliated with Procter and Gamble while the agencies Crusellas and Obelleiro-Carvajal became satellites of Colgate-Palmolive (López, 1998, pp. 229–246). By way of these U.S.–Cuba relations, Cuban *radionovelas*, adventure shows, and comedies were sold to places such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela (Paxman, 2003; Rivero, 2005). In addition, the U.S. corporation–Havana agency teams exported small LPs of Cuban radio shows that included the sponsor’s advertisements. As part of the business “package,” U.S.–Havana consortia sometimes sent Cuban advertisers to Latin American locales to train media professionals (López, 1998, p. 246).

In other instances, Cuban advertisers foresaw the emergence of opportunities, expanded their business to other countries, and then affiliated with major U.S. advertising agencies. For instance, in 1947 Mariano Guastella, president of the Cuban agency Publicidad Guastella, opened an office in New York City and spent two months in Mexico City analyzing the market with the purpose of setting up a bureau (“Publicidad Guastella en Mexico y New York,” 1947). He launched an office in Mexico City that by the early 1950s was associated with the U.S. agency McCann Erickson (Hernández Lomelí, 1996, p. 157). Mariano Guastella remained the agency’s president but the new business name, Guastella McCann-Erickson, illustrates the ongoing U.S. corporate efforts to infiltrate the Latin American media market as well as the regional entrepreneurs’ reliance on U.S. funding sources.

Although during the mid to late 1940s, the U.S.–Havana teams mostly exported scripts and advertisers, other creative personnel such as radio directors, scriptwriters, and artists were also part of the business and creative nets (López, 1998, p. 92). One issue that facilitated these transnational movements related to the establishment of contracts for radio professionals and talent, a business strategy that began in the late 1930s and was fully integrated into the Cuban broadcasting system during the 1940s (López, 1998, p. 206). Creative personnel could either be signed by advertising agencies or by radio networks; those under contract to U.S.–Havana consortia were occasionally sent to other countries to work in particular shows. With the arrival of television in Cuba in October 1950, the flow of cultural-commercial artifacts and people began to encompass television producers, a group of professionals who became crucial business and creative mediators in advertising agencies’ establishment of their television departments (“Mexicana,” 1952; “Una de las Nuestras en Mexico,” 1952).

However, not all Havana-Latin American connections were a result of the U.S.–Havana affiliations. Increasingly during this period, Latin American advertising agencies, representatives of nation-states, and television owners traveled to Cuba in search of television professionals. For example, Venezuela’s advertising agencies ARS

and VEPACO, from the late 1940s, employed several Cubans as executives, one of whom who happened to be the noted Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (Birkenmaier, 2004; Espinet Borges, 1953). Furthermore, in 1953 ARS was looking for a director for its television department and the agency's management understood that "the man they needed" was in Cuba ("La TV en Venezuela," 1953). Additionally, as I will explain, with the establishment of television in Colombia and Puerto Rico in 1954, the head of Colombia's public television station and Puerto Rican media owners hired Cubans to work for their respective systems.

The centrality of Cuba in the Latin American television landscape was related to the exponential growth of the medium on the island during its first three years. Although from 1950 to 1952 Havana had only two television stations (CMQ and Unión Radio-TV), in 1953 three other stations began their operations (CMBA-TV, channel 2; CMBF-TV, channel 7; and TV Caribe S.A., channel 11). Moreover, in 1952 Goar Mestre, owner of the Circuito CMQ, launched the first television network in Cuba, which covered Havana and the eastern provinces of Santa Clara, Camaguey, and Santiago de Cuba. As the *Diario de la Marina* radio and television reviewer wrote, "CMQ endowed Cuba with the first national television network in Latin America offering to the world the most magnificent demonstration of our level of culture, civilization, and progress" (Giró, 1952, p. 38). Television, as I have discussed elsewhere, became a complicated symbol of Cuban modernity (Rivero, 2007).

In the 1950s, what I describe as the broadcasting of Cuban modernity encompassed both technological advancement and what some critics have categorized as excellent programming. Nonetheless, the broadcasting of Cuban modernity also conveyed culture and for whom that culture should be televised. The incorporation of television in Cuba reaffirmed upper and middle class citizens' view of themselves as progressive and as technologically and economically advanced people, in comparison to Latin America, and on a par with the U.S. At the same time, the technology served as a tool that repressed particular cultural performances, peoples, and voices of political dissent, and defined citizens and regions as "modern" based on ownership of television sets and access to television signals (Rivero, 2007). It was this last aspect of the broadcasting of Cuban modernity—acquiring a television set—that influenced television's evolution. In other words, Cubans' view of themselves as modern—an imagining that was intertwined with the "American way of life" and its consumer culture (Pérez, 1999, pp. 446–468)—prompted Cuban commercial television's rapid expansion. For example, by December 1950 approximately six thousand television sets had entered the Havana port (Espinete Borges, 1950). Two years later U.S. television manufacturers indicated that "just over one-hundred thousand television sets" had been exported to Cuba (Zipser, 1953, p. F6).

The process of development in Cuban television becomes clearer when one compares Cuba with Mexico, a country that also established television in 1950 but where, contrary to Cuba, television struggled initially. For instance, in 1952 there were only twenty-five thousand television sets in Mexico City, a number that directly affected Mexico's television evolution ("Una de las Nuestras en Mexico," 1952). In an interview published in the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, Mariano Guastella

(president of Guastella MacCann-Erickson) remarked, “Most companies do not want to invest in important programs and spots . . . until they have a big enough audience to guarantee the circulation of their ads” (Anguiano, 1952, quoted in Hernández Lomelí, 1996, p. 157). Guastella described the Mexican situation as a “vicious circle” in which industries did not want to spend advertising money on television mainly because only upper-class Mexicans could afford sets that, according to another article, cost around “three thousand dollars” (“Una de las Nuestras en Mexico,” 1952). Not until 1955, with the intervention of the Mexican government and a well-established monopoly assisted by the government, did television turn the corner, becoming a profitable business in Mexico in the late 1960s and the 1970s (Hernández Lomelí, 1996; Sinclair, 1999). Television in 1950s Cuba, on the other hand, responded to market flows and, as such, its fortunes were directly tied to the unpredictable ups and downs of Cuba’s mono-economy. Therefore, the initial Cuban television explosion was linked to the post World War II economic boom, while the first major television crisis, that took place in 1954, was a product of a decline in the international sugar market (Pérez, 1999, p. 420). This market drop initiated a series of recessions during the 1950s which, according to Louis Pérez, made Cubans realize that the future “was uncertain indeed” (*ibid.*).

Among those uncertain and somewhat perplexed Cubans were television executives, creative personnel, and technical staff, some of whom could not understand the unexpected closing of *Televisión del Caribe*, one of the three stations that began operations in 1953. As a *New York Times* article reported, “The Cuban TV industry as a whole was estimated conservatively to be losing more than \$100,000 per month” (“Cuban Station Closes,” 1954). Journalists and television professionals began to show signs of despair with the sudden cancellation of top-rated shows. “Bad news,” wrote a *Bohemia* journalist, “‘Cabaret Regalias,’ the most watched, listened to, talked about, and expensive television show will not have a sponsor after August” (“Decisión Firme,” 1954). The words of Goar Mestre, the only television owner who was surviving the crisis, explained the situation: “To the decline of the nation’s economy we need to add a decisive reality: that we do not have enough advertisers or viewers to sustain the five stations that are operating today” (“Panorama de Nuestra TV,” 1954). In a period of economic uncertainty and, although not mentioned by Mestre, increased political instability, it became difficult for Cuban television to continue its rapid growth. Hence, even as a UNESCO study released in 1956 stated that Cuba was preceded only by the United States, Canada, and England in number of television sets, the 1954 crisis and its aftermath represented a significant juncture that transformed the industry at both the national and regional levels (“Cuba: Una de las ‘Cuatro Grandes’ en la Televisión Mundial,” 1956).

On the national stage, Cuban television underwent drastic changes in terms of programming, production practices, and market structure. With the steady cancellation of programs, including elaborate and expensive variety shows, dramas, and comedies, television stations began to produce a series of low budget music and variety shows, talent shows, panel shows, and game shows (“La Mocha en el Aire,” 1954; “Cambios y más Cambios,” 1955; “Otro Programa que se va,” 1956). Only

during the ratings season (usually in the months of February and June) did television producers and advertisers spend large amounts of money for their programming (“El Ballet Llega al Pueblo,” 1955; “Atracciones Internacionales,” 1956). Furthermore, after the 1954 crisis the Havana stations began gradually to incorporate imported shows into their evening schedules. While locally produced programming such as variety shows, *telenovelas*, and Cuba’s version of the U.S. show *Queen for a Day* obtained high ratings, the sweeping importation of U.S. movies and shows dubbed in Spanish became a major concern for television professionals and journalists in the year preceding the revolution (“El Año del Oeste,” 1958).

The economic decline also transformed hiring practices, particularly for the talent. As previously discussed, from the 1940s radio networks and advertising agencies signed both renowned and promising artists. However, after the crisis, only established actors and actresses obtained contracts—a process that diminished the chances for aspiring performers (“Los ‘Boleros’ se Quedan en Marte,” 1954)⁴. Additionally, it became very difficult for new scriptwriters to gain experience, as television owners and agencies preferred to work with already tested Cuban writers who, through their previous work, had demonstrated their ability to create highly rated and commercially successful shows.

The crisis also pushed television owners to expand and invest in business projects in the regional market. For instance, in 1954 Goar Mestre invested in WAPA-TV, one of the two television stations that began operations in Puerto Rico that year (“Cuba y Puerto Rico,” 1954)⁵. One of the most important developments of 1954 was the export of Cuban kinescopes across Latin America. As Goar Mestre explained, “Although my preparations are in the early stages, I have great hopes that we will be able to sell our Cuban programs to stations in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Colombia” (“Nuevos Mercados,” 1954)⁶. In this news story, Mestre suggested that the exportation of kinescopes would help the local television industry and CMQ’s media professionals. However, a *Bohemia* article published three years later demonstrates that the only one who actually profited from these transnational endeavors was CMQ’s owner. Taking advantage of the unstable job climate, Mestre began to design contracts requiring Circuito CMQ’s radio and television scriptwriters to sign away their rights as authors. This business strategy was detrimental to many scriptwriters who, by the mid-1950s, were independently selling their scripts throughout Latin America (“Y Despues no Quieren que Digan,” 1957)⁷. Thus, by means of exploiting his under-contract talent and by way of expanding his operations across the region, Goar Mestre established his market dominance in Cuba. By 1958, Mestre owned CMQ’s network, the Televisión Nacional network, and Havana’s channel 7. Only two other television owners, Amadeo Barletta, who was the proprietor of Telemundo’s network and Havana’s channel 10, and Gaspar Pumarejo, who in 1958 launched channel 12, the first color television station in Cuba and Latin America, attempted to challenge Mestre’s monopoly.

Mestre’s business tactics, in addition to the illegal practice of selling radio and television scripts without the authors’ consent (“Pirateria,” 1954), were not the only local-industrial processes that had repercussions at the regional-transnational level.

The shrinking job market resulting from the industry's restructuring instigated a series of migratory waves of Cuban media professionals and talent throughout Latin America. Moreover, while more difficult to uncover, the political censorship that began to take place after Batista's military coup, and that was mandated by law in 1957, probably compelled several media professionals (particularly journalists) to leave the country. However, what is covered in Cuban newspapers and magazines stories is the migration of some artists as a result of moral censorship. After Batista's coup, the radio and television industry's self-regulatory private organization, the Commission on Radio Ethics (CRE), initiated a strict moralizing campaign targeting entertainment programming. The purpose behind the CRE's series of moral rules was to avoid governmental intervention (Rivero, 2007). Although the CRE's policing prevented Batista's Minister of Communication from intervening in entertainment programming until 1956, the private organization's ongoing practice of fining and suspending artists motivated several comedians to find work outside Cuba.

Three primary issues facilitated the relocation of Cubans during and after 1954: first, the emergence of television in various places throughout the region; second, the lack of trained personnel in the countries that set up this complex system; and third, Cubans' vast experience in multiple aspects of television production. Contrary to the post-1959 massive migrations, the move of Cuban technical staff, television executives, and talent at this time was in many cases transitory. However, what is important about these sometimes permanent, other times temporary, relocations is that they solidified the Cuban connections in Latin America and served as important links for the post-1959 exodus.

Bogotá, Caracas, and San Juan were the primary cities Cuban media personnel selected as their new job sites, yet several Cubans also looked for jobs in Santo Domingo and Mexico City. As a *Bohemia* journalist predicted in 1954, "There is a light of hope for our TV artists, technical staff, and producers. This light is coming from South and Central America, from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic" ("El Éxodo," 1954). The opening of multiple job opportunities throughout Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean helped the media professionals affected by Cuba's television crisis.

The Cuban influence in Colombia was related to technical expertise. In 1954, when Colombia's government established its first station (Radiodifusora Nacional de Televisión), government officials acquired all the necessary equipment but needed television experts to launch the system. Given that, according to Colombian television pioneers, Cuba was "one of the Latin American countries where television was most developed," the director of the public television system traveled to the island and hired technical staff (Rodríguez, 1989, p. 24). For example, the scriptwriter and producer Gaspar Arias went to Bogota with "ten other Cubans—cameramen, video and audio technicians, and lighting designers—to provide Colombia's channel 10 with an attractive programming and to train its native personnel" ("Cubanos en la TV Colombiana," 1954). Thus, in the case of Colombia, Cubans were in charge of television's technical structure, while the creative work was in the hands of local talent (Rodríguez, 1989, p. 25).

In Venezuela and Puerto Rico, the Cuban connections encompassed the technical, commercial, and cultural aspects of television. As previously mentioned, the Cuban influences in Venezuela began through local advertising agencies' hiring of Cubans to develop commercial radio campaigns—a practice that was later extended to television producers.⁸ Besides Cubans' incorporation into the workforce of Venezuela's advertising agencies, many Cuban media professionals traveled to Caracas to give courses on television production. Additionally, Cubans in Venezuela also influenced the creative facet of television, as Cuban actors and scriptwriters frequently worked in commercial stations in Caracas. "The new promised land for the artists is Venezuela. In their radio and television stations they pay thousands," a *Bohemia* journalist wrote ("Baraúnda," 1956, p. 42). The availability of numerous apparently profitable jobs served as incentives for Cuban television executives, technical staff, and talent to see Venezuela as the land of media opportunity.

Puerto Rico was another financially attractive media market with a multiplicity of prospective jobs. Although during the late 1940s it was technical and business personnel that were hired to work in commercial radio, Cubans' lasting impact was related to commercial television. With the establishment of television in 1954, Puerto Rican media owners brought in Cubans to help develop the medium's technology, while television producers continued with the radio tradition of buying inexpensive and commercially successful Cuban scripts. Facilitating Cubans' rapid immersion into Puerto Rico's mediascape were the cultural similarities between these two Caribbean islands—a shared linguistic, performative, and cultural space that can be traced back to the Spanish colonial period (Rivero, 2005). Perhaps because of these cultural links it became easier for some Cuban comedians censored by the CRE to find jobs in Puerto Rico ("Allá no es Como Aquí," 1956).

Even though from 1954 to 1958 many media professionals left Cuba to work in various Latin American countries, Havana still had one of the most developed television industries in the region. By 1958 the three existing networks were in the process of expanding to cover the entire island and, according to U.S. numbers, approximately 500,000 television sets were in use in Cuba in 1960 (Codel, 1960, p. 3). Furthermore, Cuban radio and television scripts continued to be sold throughout Latin America, and Havana, deemed one of the most cosmopolitan and modern cities in the region, attracted international talent who frequently performed in casinos and in radio and television shows.

However, the crisis that began in 1954 persisted, affecting the industry until the triumph of the Cuban revolution. Dubbed programming dominated the stations' evening schedules in 1958 and Cuba fell behind in this U.S.–regional media trade—a business that, at the time, was controlled by Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Spain. CMQ and the company *Televisión Habanera* began dubbing projects in the year prior to the revolution, and another dubbing industry company was founded in 1959, but this commercial endeavor never succeeded (Glez, 1958; "Otra Industria Cubana," 1959). The broadcasting system that had defined Cuba since 1922 officially ceased to exist in 1960. Television was transformed by Fidel Castro's revolutionary government into an instrument for the dissemination of a new political, cultural, and social project. The

state, instead of local and transnational capital and markets, would delineate Cuba's broadcasting.

Migrations, Creative Absorptions, and the Emergence of Regional Media Capitals

In 1961 the president of the U.S. National Association of Broadcasters sent a letter to Argentina's adopted son—Cuban media mogul Goar Mestre—soliciting his assistance for Martin Codel's research into Latin American broadcasting industries. At the time, all the television owners and many executives, creative personnel, and technical staff had already left Cuba or were in the process of leaving the island. The Havana connections initiated during the 1940s radio era and fortified during the 1950s were instrumental in the relocation of media professionals and talent. By the early 1960s Cubans with extensive knowledge and experience in television and advertising could be found in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Lima, Miami, New York City, Rio de Janeiro, and San Juan.

Certainly not all Cuban executives, technical staff, and creative personnel went into exile. The television professionals who stayed became key members in the emerging state-sponsored and controlled broadcasting system.⁹ Additionally, the highly experienced advertising professionals who remained in Cuba played a fundamental role in crafting propaganda campaigns to form a new socialist state and citizenry (Escalante, 1976; Hernández-Reguant, 2002; Nuñez-Machín, 1983). Those who did leave, as some of the recent scholarship has demonstrated, became major figures in the development of broadcasting and advertising corporations in Latin America and in the U.S. Spanish-language scene (Dávila, 2001; Rivero, 2005; Sinclair, 2003; Varela, 2005).

Taking into account the ways in which, according to Curtin's (2007) theorization of media capitals, the "trajectories of creative migration" (the movement of trained labor and talent to a particular place) influence the development of media centers, one could say that the migration of highly skilled media and advertising professionals from Cuba fueled the establishment of contemporary geolinguistic media capitals. As Curtin (2007) observes, media capitals are "constantly absorbing influences from near and far," attempting to differentiate themselves from competitors while, at the same time, attracting talent from other media capitals (p. 287). The demise of Havana as a commercial broadcasting center had an impact on the creative, technical, and managerial force of regional media capitals during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

The trajectories of creative migration, in conjunction with the collapse of Havana as a commercial broadcasting hub, also illustrate a second point. Bearing in mind that media capitals are "geographically relational"—that is, local, regional, and global forces influence the emergence of nodes of media production and distribution (Curtin, 2007, p. 285)—the collapse of Havana as a commercial media hub directly and indirectly spawned the development of other Latin American and U.S. Spanish-language media capitals. As noted previously, the existing literature documents the Cuban impact in Mexico and in Brazil in terms of the *radionovela* and *telenovela* genre. Today, Mexico and Brazil together with Miami are deemed contemporary geo-linguistic media hubs

for the production and distribution of *telenovelas*, the cultural artifacts that have defined the Latin American television landscape at national, regional, and global levels. In fact, a 2007 *Variety.com* article covering the fiftieth anniversary of Televisa's *telenovela* production acknowledges the Cuban influence, noting that Mexican *telenovelas* "were adapted from the immense library of Cuban radio dramas" (O'Boyle, 2007). That said, if during the 1940s and 1950s Cuban media professionals were traveling to various countries in Latin America training advertisers, setting up the technical aspects of television stations, and running courses in television production—in short, adapting the U.S. broadcasting system—one should ask what other Cuban inflicted elements were absorbed by post-1960s geo-linguistic media capitals? Or, to use a specific example, if there had been no revolution in Cuba, would Miami be the "Hollywood of Latin America" (Sinclair, 2003)?

I am not suggesting that Havana and its media professionals were the only influence in the development of past and contemporary regional media capitals. Rather, by foregrounding the impact of Havana and its media professionals during the 1940s and 1950s and after the Cuban revolution, I am re-introducing Cuba into television's scholarly discussion while concomitantly attempting to alter conceptualizations of the region's television past. As discussed in this essay, the U.S. model of television came to numerous countries by way of Cuba's adapted version of that model. Recognition of this process should lead us to ask how this additional layer of mediation complicates our understanding of Latin American television.

What I am proposing here is a scholarly re-assessment of past and contemporary Latin American television that considers long-established cultural, business, and economic relations, communications among creative personnel, and interactions among media professionals. We should re-examine the formation of Latin American broadcasting industries in light of local and foreign investments and influences, the nation-state, and national and regional flows of cultural artifacts and people. To compose a history of the region's television past that exclusively and narrowly concentrates on contemporary media capitals would not only be a limited assessment of the commercial and cultural relations that defined the beginning of television in Latin America but would also be a missed opportunity to uncover the multiple processes that helped form the current geo-linguistic media capitals. Equally important, ignoring the Cuban influence in the region before and after the Cuban revolution would erase a crucial aspect of the Latin American media landscape.

Notes

- [1] According to John Sinclair (2005, p. 196), a geo-linguistic region "is defined not just by its geographical contours, but also in a virtual sense, by commonalities of language and culture." These commonalities of language and culture also include dispersed diasporic populations around the world.
- [2] In this essay I focus exclusively on Havana as a Latin American media capital. This piece could be seen as a starting point for future comparative work between Havana and other Latin American media industries during the 1940s and 1950s.

- [3] Based on the communication laws published in the *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba*, the first broadcasting laws were instituted in 1934. In 1938 the government established the Comisión Nacional de Radio (the Radio National Commission), which regulated all legal, cultural, and business aspects of radio broadcasting. In 1939, the government modified some of the laws instituted in 1934, and in 1942 the 1939 broadcasting laws were eradicated (Batista et al., 1942, pp. 1355–1361).
- [4] Los ‘boleros’ se quedam en Marte. (1954, March 28). *Bohemia*, 46, p. 47.
- [5] ‘Cuba y Puerto Rico son . . .’ (1954, August 22). *Bohemia*, 46, pp. 44–45.
- [6] Nuevos mercados. (1954, May 16). *Bohemia*, 46, p. 44.
- [7] “Y despues no quieren que digan . . .” (1957, April 7). *Bohemia*, 49, pp. 52–53.
- [8] As in Colombia, the first television station in Venezuela launched in 1952 was public. Nonetheless, a year later, Caracas had two commercial stations: Televisa and Radio Caracas-TV (Espinet Borges, 1953).
- [9] While disconnected from broadcasting, one of the most important media transformations after the triumph of the Cuban revolution was the establishment of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). Through the ICAIC’s films, Havana became a Latin American center of film production, creating a new style of cinema that defied Hollywood’s ideological, aesthetic, and commercial conventions (see Chanan, 2004).

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