

# How Cubans Try to Tweet Their Way to Freedom

By [Esther Dyson](#)

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I was taking my usual morning swim, but this time on the roof of the Prague Central hotel in Havana, where the sun does not rise until 6.30 a.m. even in May. In the dim light, I saw a man poolside. He told me that the pool didn't open until 9:00 a.m. I apologized. He shrugged and let me stay.

But he did not leave. The day before, I had met with two men who, while not quite activists, are clearly unhappy with conditions in the country. Our conversation had taken place in the hotel's lobby. At the table next to us, two men seemed more interested in our business than their own. Could this man at the pool have something to do with that meeting?

It was not inconceivable, though it was unlikely. I would not have been a good target, and the conversation had been frustratingly mild. I kept swimming as paranoid fantasies formed in my head.

In fact, the two passive dissidents had said little. What did they want? Well, more freedom and the ability to be published and heard in Cuba. Orlando Luis Pardo (@OLPL), a blogger, had published four books, but now no publisher in Cuba will talk to him.

In theory, Pardo and his friend Antonio Rodiles want lots of things, such as regime change, a free economy and other things too disruptive to mention. But they are careful not to do anything that smacks of protest or action. That discretion keeps them safe, more or less. ▣

As in most countries classified as "unfree" by human rights organizations, enforcement of the law can be arbitrary. The authorities know who the dissidents are and "remind" them of that from time to time. For example, in a widely noted and disputed incident, Pardo was grabbed by police on the street, along with Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez, and roughed up.

The obvious route to change for Cuban dissidents would be to leave — as so many have done, often at the government's invitation. But Pardo and Rodiles don't want to leave. In fact, Rodiles returned after getting a graduate degree in theoretical physics abroad. Pardo is a biochemist trained in Havana. They want to stay, hoping, but not agitating, for change.

I thought hard, and I checked with Pardo and Rodiles before publishing this column. Pardo wrote back: "I am not an undercover actor at all. Transparency is my best protection under totalitarianism. I do not need any kind of secret software to blog or rules to talk safely from a Cuban mobile phone. In fact, I prefer the political police to be aware of all of my writings. They are my privileged readers. I talk freely almost as a provocative performance. I hope that the result is contagious for the rest of our somehow zombie citizens."

Rodiles added, "We are always breaking the 'law,' because, according to the present constitution, nothing can be attempted against the development of socialism. But we keep moving with our project, and I have been straight with the secret police. If they want to stop me, they need to arrest me."

Pardo and Rodiles are probably better known outside Cuba than they are at home, thanks to the Internet, which allows them to publish worldwide but is barely available in Cuba. (I met them via Twitter by posting a request to meet some "entrepreneurs" in Havana.)

Indeed, I have not seen such a lack of connectivity since I first went to Russia 23 years ago. Local phone calls — let alone international ones — frequently fail to connect. The Internet is accessible in hotels — limited bandwidth for \$8 an hour — and some government offices, but not to regular people. Those who want to use it rely on foreign embassies, government friends with access and people like me who can purchase Internet cards in their hotels. (I observed the rules: The only thing I gave to Pardo and Rodiles was my partly used Wi-Fi card.)

Local government-employed academics I talked to bemoaned the lack of Internet access, which they attributed to the U.S. embargo, technical problems or complications with the local infrastructure. Everyone agreed that Internet access could dramatically help the economy but seemed unwilling to concede that it was regarded as a political threat and thus was being delayed intentionally.

A flood of money coming into Cuba would not necessarily help. While it would certainly make the country as a whole richer, it would most likely increase not just legitimate inequality —

the kind of "winning" that motivates entrepreneurs — but most likely corruption as well. In a country as regulated as Cuba is, there are certainly people in positions of power who would be willing to bend those regulations for a share of the benefits accruing to a foreign investor.

In short, Cuba is frustrating and contradictory. Havana's buildings are stunningly beautiful, but most are crumbling. The racial inequality that the government had mostly eradicated before seems to be increasing again, especially since private-sector tourism jobs, the main source of private income, seem to go disproportionately to white people. The government has done many things well, most notably supporting the arts and maintaining economic equality.

But the price is extremely high. You must work for the state unless you pick one of about 200 specified self-employment occupations, such as restaurant owner, actress, tour guide or carpenter. You can employ a few other people in your restaurant, for example, but not too many. Pardo's girlfriend, a dentist, cannot go into practice for herself. She works for a government clinic.

In the end, I don't really know how to interpret what I saw in Cuba. These two men spoke relatively freely. Is their ability to do that a sign that the government knows that few people are listening? What looks like a peaceful rooftop in the morning could, in fact, be a scene of intimidation. It all depends on how you interpret it — and on how they interpret you.

Esther Dyson, CEO of EDventure Holdings, is an active investor in a variety of start-ups around the world. Her interests include information technology, health care, private aviation and space travel. © Project Syndicate

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