Most research has recently focused on contentious uses of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in extraordinary political conjunctures (Tibet, Burma, Iran, the so called “Arab Spring”) and has produced antagonistic analyses and conclusions as far as their impact on freedom and democratization (see especially the debate between Clay Shirky and Evgeny Morozov). Empirical research is thus still very much needed to try and disentangle the logics born in and from the internet and other NICTs from those which are linked to other cultural, political and communication patterns (either with the old media, social dynamics of protest, governments’ repressive tactics, etc.)

The aim of this article is to de-center our perspective on contentious uses of new technologies both as far as temporality and causality are concerned. I propose to analyze a non extraordinary conjuncture in which a specific online protest did have an impact on an authoritarian regime (Cuba), without unsettling the regime altogether. And I propose to analyze this case in a comprehensive way, as a complex process involving both local and transnational actors, old and new media and online/offline dynamics, rather than to focus on causality between pre-defined variables.

The studied case will be referred to as the “Gorki case”, after the name of its main protagonist: Cuban punk singer Gorki Aguila. Aguila was arrested on the 25th of August 2008, in Havana, Cuba, under charges of “social dangerousness”, defined in the Cuban law as "the specific proclivity of a person to commit crimes, as shown by his conduct, when in manifest contradiction with the norms of socialist morality". With this law, any Cuban citizen can be arrested before he commits a crime, under assumptions that he could commit a crime. With such charges Gorki Aguila could be condemned to at least one and up to four years in prison. Since Gorki had already been imprisoned, from 2003 to 2005, under drug dealing charges, the possibility that he could be released were perceived, by his friends and supporters, as fairly dim. Nevertheless, as soon as news of his arrest spread out, a huge campaign was launched with one single motto “Free Gorki!”. 

The Gorki case is a relevant case to discuss the relationship between digital media and politics in the global South, in an authoritarian context, where uses of digital media are specific due to restrictive access and repression. It indeed allows us to address the question of their political impact. Since collective action in authoritarian contexts is especially costly, virtual communication is often a privileged channel to circulate information (Hill and Hughes 1999, Yang 2003, Damm and Thomas 2006), express claims (Rahimi 2003, Davis 2008, Cardon and Granjon 2010) and subvert social control (Simon et al 2002, Nadi and Firth 2004). But the impact of those contentious uses of the internet is quite uncertain and varies considerably across regimes and contexts. Though we can expect the impact of contentious virtual arenas to be especially strong in contexts of state monopoly over the media (Hoffmann 2011), we need to understand under what conditions those virtual spheres ever become influential,
especially in authoritarian contexts in which access to new technologies remains scarce and monitored (Hugues 2002, Deibert 2003).

My main assumption is that influence is linked to publicity: the more an issue becomes public, the more it can influence agenda setting forces and therefore decision makers such as political authorities. I understand publicity as a process which allows an issue to become visible for large social groups (Roussel 2009), generally through its exposure in the mainstream media. But publicity is especially problematic in an authoritarian context, with state monopoly over the media, which thus prevents the emergence of local publics – contrary to democratic and more open authoritarian contexts (van de Donk et al 2004). That is where contentious uses of NICTs come into play.

It is essential to make a distinction between virtual spheres and public spheres. In democratic contexts, virtual spheres are indeed characterized by their openness, since there is no gatekeeper (editors, publishers, selection committees, etc.) to prevent people from writing and expressing their views online (Cardon and Granjon 2010). The situation is somewhat different in authoritarian contexts, where blogs and websites can be censored, therefore rendered invisible – through they sometimes remain accessible outside their borders. We thus need to understand how those virtual arenas can become public arenas, often through issue take up in the mainstream media (Rucht 2004), through dynamics of spill over (Pfetsch and Adam 2011).

We are here confronted with two problems. Can mainstream media be influenced by issues discussed in virtual spheres since it is often rather the other way round (Oegema et al 2008), and since access to those mainstream media is unequal (Wolfsfeld 1997, Cardon and Granjon 2010)? And, even if they do, international visibility alone is often insufficient to impact local and national politics (O’Leary 2000, Chowdhury 2008), especially if the governments’ legitimacy remains strong within their borders (Laursen 2000, Chase 2003, Munoz 2009) and if there is no local mobilization (Faris 2008, Nafisi 2008), or at least no local publics. It is thus necessary to understand in what ways and under which conditions international publicity can contribute to influence decision making within authoritarian contexts.

Starting from the Gorki case, I’ll first show how an improbable online mobilization in favor of the artist could take place in the authoritarian Cuban context, where access to NTICs is severely limited. I will then argue that the role of the transnational community of Cuban migrants has played a crucial role both in the online campaign and as far as the news spill over from new to old media. And I will finally assess the online campaign’s impact on Cuban politics.

My findings are based on the analysis and interpretation of the extensive data collected on the Gorki case (blog posts, newspaper articles, testimonies), six months of daily observation of the Cuban blogosphere (following closely two major online news platforms, a few prominent blogs, checking many more in a less systematic way and focusing especially on major online polemics among bloggers), and fourteen in-depth interviews conducted with Cuban exile bloggers and virtual platform administrators. The article also benefits from my previous PhD research, for which I conducted an eleven-month ethnographic fieldwork in Havana (five trips between 2006 and 2010), while becoming acquainted with the – then – emerging blogosphere (I’ve been reading Cuban blogs on a regular basis since 2008).
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\(^{i}\) http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/12/the-net-advantage/
\(^{ii}\) Article 72 of the Cuban penal law (my translation).