

Publication: The Miami Herald; Date: Mar 10, 2013; Section: Front Page; Page: 6A

CUBA

Yoani: Expression thrives thanks to flash drives

- Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez, speaking at a media forum in Mexico, said Cubans use computer memory sticks to evade Internet censorship.

BY TIM JOHNSON McClatchy News Service

PUEBLA, Mexico — Dissident Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez on Saturday told newspaper publishers from around the Western Hemisphere that “nothing is changing” in Cuba’s ossified political system and that “the situation of press freedom in my country is calamitous.”

But Sánchez said underground blogs, digital portals and illicit e-magazines proliferate, passed around on removable computer drives known as memory sticks. The small computer memories, also known as flash drives or thumb drives, are dropped into friendly hands on buses and along street corners, offering a surprising number of Cubans access to information.

“Information circulates hand-to-hand through this wonderful gadget known as the memory stick,” Sánchez said, “and it is difficult for the government to intercept them. I can’t imagine that they can put a police officer on every corner to see who has a flash drive and who doesn’t.”

Sánchez said “these little gizmos” have “helped us a lot to pass information.”

After five years of requesting travel documents to receive multiple awards outside of Cuba, Sánchez, 37, received a passport in late January and was allowed to depart on a tour of 12 countries in South America, Europe and North America. She expects to return to Cuba when her tour ends after nearly three months.

Sánchez’s blog, Generation Y, is translated into more than 20 languages, and she has nearly 440,000 followers on her Twitter account.

Dissidents who draw the attention of the Cuban regime, led by Raúl Castro after he took over for his brother Fidel in 2008, are being repressed in ways that “don’t leave fingerprints,” Sánchez said.

“Often, activists, including independent journalists, are detained on the street, pulled into cars without plates, pushed, threatened [and] questioned by civilians who never identify themselves,” she said, only to be freed after a few hours.

Sánchez said recent measures to loosen controls over self-employment do not mark significant change to the economic model that has kept the Castro brothers in power on the island since 1959. “These are adjustments to prolong their power,” she said.

Speaking in an auditorium filled with several hundred publishers, editors and journalists gathered for a semi-annual meeting of the Inter American Press Association, Sánchez was asked when dramatic change might come to Cuba.

“It’s the big question that 11 million Cubans are asking ourselves,” she responded. “It’s no mystery or secret to any of us that the generation [of leaders] in power is arriving at the midnight of their lives.”

Once the octogenarian Castro brothers leave power, she said, “it will be very difficult for the heirs to maintain control of the nation.” They have neither

the charisma nor the popular support to hold the reins of power for long, she said.

The death on Tuesday of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, whose socialist government provides Cuba with a lifeline of nearly 100,000 barrels of crude oil a day, “might catalyze — who knows? — a series of openings in our country,” she said.

Predicting change in Cuba is difficult, and Sánchez said she liked to use as a metaphor the decrepit mansions in Old Havana, which can often withstand hurricanes “even though they are at the point of falling down.”

“The Cuban system is like one of these old mansions, facing into the wind and not falling down,” she said. “But one day, they want to fix the door. They take out screws, and the house collapses.”

Sánchez dismissed Cuban government estimates that 20 percent of the island has access to the Internet, saying her own observations suggest it may be only 3 percent.

“The number [of users] is very difficult to know because in Cuba not only opinions can get you sent to jail, also polling. My own personal thermometer, from what I see around me, is that there is a true network of viral information.”

Still, she said, any Cuban who wants to look for information will find it, although disagreeing with the government remains a punishable offense. “The average Cuban no longer swallows the pabulum of information given by the government. He or she is looking for more,” Sánchez said.

Cubans are creating and distributing information on the sly, she said.

“The power and ingenuity of the alternative media in distributing information in Cuba is incredible,” she said. The Castro government, she said, “is on the defensive.”

“It either opens the media to other voices, or another kind of journalism that is more objective and real and shows what is happening in Cuban society,” she said, “or it stays as it is now, totally defensive, attacking, insulting, creating libel campaigns [and] media lynchings.”



SANCHEZ