Yeidy M. Rivero  

As Cuba moves into a phase of diplomatic opening with the United States, commentators are drawing attention to the state of its electronic and social media. They depict Cuba as lagging behind, with potential users poised to pounce on infrastructural changes that might accompany shifts in political winds. There is much to confirm, and much to dispute in this representation of Cuban realities. One point of entry is a book like this one, which reminds readers of the ways Cuba was once the media hub of the Caribbean and Latin America. Beginning in the 1920s, Cuba's powerful and enormously successful radio and television industries blanketed the country and region with sounds, images, music, and news. As the first Latin American country to create a television network and the second in the world to broadcast in color, Cuba led rather than lagged behind. Broadcasting Modernity tells the story of this acquisition and the first decade of use, as government officials, producers, and advertisers struggled to define and control the increasingly popular medium.

Yeidy Rivero is interested in the ways that television and modernity constituted one another. Merely having the technological apparatus and expertise to implement television was one marker of modernity. But, according to Rivero, the medium itself was used to promulgate and represent distinct registers of modernity. While those changed over time—at times the emphasis was on European, highbrow versions of modernity, while at others it proffered Socialist, anti-imperial, working-class iterations—the managers of television's programming and scope didn't stray far from the conviction that the medium was a result of (and ought to be used to further instigate) Cuba's experience of modernity. While Rivero supports her claims with evidence drawn from correspondence, legislation, and televisual content, the notion of modernity itself merits more careful attention. What is distinctive about Cuba's particular notions of modernity, and whether they are at all contradictory or multivalent, are questions that might have been more fully developed in the text.

This doesn't detract from the book's considerable strengths, particularly in tracing the legal regimes that shaped broadcasting. By following the laws that censored or aimed to keep track of potentially problematic content, readers get a textured sense of how officials used the medium for ideological ends and, importantly, the many ways programmers, writers, and producers pushed back when they found those restrictions prohibitive. Rivero also pays attention to transmedia exchanges, noting the continuing relevance and importance of the press with regard to the making of television. Newspapers and magazines...
reported on, monitored, supported, and challenged television, creating a richly mediated environment, a noisy and contentious public sphere. As the narrative traces legal and administrative developments interspersed with occasional descriptions of programming, readers get an idea of how this medium worked its way into everyday life. Media history often grapples with the question of audience, and Rivero addresses this whenever possible, using scant survey material as well as making informed inferences from evidence such as the cost of television sets and their likely distribution. The studies and evidence, as she points out, are skewed to Havana, and it remains for other researchers to further elaborate on variations beyond Havana and its environs. The book thus opens questions as much as settles them, and indicates themes for future research.

Two chapters devoted to the early years of the Cuban Revolution are rich in descriptions of the ways in which Fidel Castro and television successfully enhanced one another’s reputation. Rivero’s descriptions of Castro’s use of his distinctive voice and charismatic presence to televise the Revolution and create an audience for both revolution and television make an important contribution to ongoing debates about media, politics, and revolutionary narratives.

The focus and framing of the study justifiably place radio broadcasting, film, and the recorded music industry on the margins of her research. Media history often works to separate analyses of forms of media—radio, television, press, film, and recorded music are seldom put in the same analytical frame. With the proliferation of studies of Cuban media, such as this one, a path appears for scholars to look across and within the audiovisual terrain and work toward a greater understanding of the incursion of multiple forms of media in everyday life.

Alejandra Bronfman
Department of History, University of British Columbia,
V6T 1Z1 Vancouver BC, Canada
alejandra.bronfman@ubc.ca