

Introduction to el Paquete

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**DOSSIER: PACKAGING CUBAN MEDIA; COMMUNITIES
OF DIGITAL SHARING IN CUBA AND ITS DIASPORA**

Organized by Jennifer Cearns

Introduction to el Paquete

Cuba's peer-to-peer digital file sharing network *el paquete* (the package) has gained global attention in recent years (Helft 2015; García Martínez 2017; San Pedro 2015; Parish 2018), viewed as a domestic response to a widespread scarcity of internet access, and even an inventive answer to Netflix (Ayuso 2015, see also Farrell, this issue) from an island that remains prohibited from officially consuming much international digital content (by both the embargo and Cuban state internet restrictions). The network has grown and consolidated itself over the past eight or so years to become the primary source of information and entertainment for the majority of Cubans across the island; indeed, some even consider it the island's largest (unofficial) employer (Press 2015; Fazekas and Marshall 2016). The Cuban poet and essayist Victor Fowler Calzada considers it "one of the most important cultural phenomena the country has experienced in the past quarter century" (Johnson 2015).

This curated database of digital content circulates hand-to-hand across the island through USB sticks and hard drives, and it includes everything from last night's episode of *Game of Thrones* aired on HBO in the United States to thousands of hours of international TV shows and movies, video games, music and music videos, sports matches, e-books and magazines, cell phone apps, antivirus updates, and classified advertisements. All put together, the content amounts to up to one terabyte at a time, although few Cubans actually purchase the entire thing. The popularity and ubiquity of this network is such that while in 2015, it was distributed on a weekly basis, crossing the island every Monday morning with bus drivers and pilots, by 2017 it had become a daily phenomenon, with content copied, recopied, and sold through networks of *paqueteros* (packagers), who in turn distribute the material for a profit in their local area. The cost of subscribing to the *paquete* varies from neighborhood to neighborhood, and dealer to dealer, but prices can be as low as 2 Cuban pesos (\$0.10 US) for an episode of a show, thus allowing Cubans to "transform their offline digital devices and television set into the equivalent of cloud-enabled, data-rich smart phones and TVs" (Henken 2017, 433).

For the most part, compilers of this digital content toe a delicate line of legality, and the unwritten rule for participation without unpleasant consequences is that no politics or pornography can be included. Meanwhile, revenue comes back through two avenues: payments from subscribers and paid advertisements from local private businesses. Most *paqueteros* are able to operate legally

under a set of licenses for self-employed work (Ritter 2014; Henken and Ritter 2014), although many of these licenses were frozen in 2017, and private advertising remains situated within a regulatory gray area, given the combination of a state mass media monopoly and a previous lack of private businesses that consequently meant no specific law was needed in this regard. Alongside its international content, since 2013 the network has also facilitated the distribution of independently produced Cuban content, including journalism, music and domestic TV shows and film, allowing new genres and voices to be circulated more widely through the public sphere (see Henken and Levine, this issue; Duong 2013, Henken 2017, Farrell 2019).

While *el paquete* has been largely fetishized by the wider world as a surprising digital quirk in an otherwise “analogue” place viewed as stuck in the past, it in fact does not represent anything drastically new to Cuban societal organization. Indeed, *el paquete* is arguably the archetypal Cuban response to a scarcity of digital content, given the degree to which informal networks have been crucial to most aspects of Cuban consumption for decades, becoming the definitive manner in which the problems of everyday life are resolved (Fernández 2000, 29–32; Henken 2005; Pertierra 2011; Cearn 2020; Farrell 2019). The acquisition of goods through informal means remains entirely standard practice to Cubans, who consider it “normal or even admirable behaviour that is not necessarily a disavowal of the Cuban state or of the socialist economy” (Pertierra 2012, 402). This black market bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966; Derrida 1978; Deleuze and Guattari 2004) dominates myriad aspects in Cuban everyday life, from sourcing groceries to getting from place to place, as has been typical in many post-Soviet economies (Morris and Polese 2014; Ledeneva 2017; Centeno and Portes 2006). In this regard, *el paquete* arguably represents a recent dénouement of what has long been a domestic approach to obtaining both material and digital goods on the island.

A Brief History of Media Sharing in Cuba

El paquete’s genesis actually goes back several decades, to the 1970s and 1980s, when Cubans first started to find ways to circulate foreign films, magazines, and music that didn’t air on state-run TV. My thirty-year-old friend Nestor has vivid childhood memories of helping his grandfather, who had a side business renting out books and movies:

He had this great passion for cinema . . . so as an alternative means of income he started renting out magazines, books and films in the 1970s. The earliest memory that I have of that part of the business was a big wooden trunk he had for all the magazines. And I remember another person would come from another city to swap with my grandfather. The thing was, you’d have 100 or 150 books and a group of customers, so when your

customers had read everything, you had to do something, so to get round that problem my grandfather would circulate materials with someone in another city. They used to communicate between themselves, like networks, and like that it grew . . . a network to distribute and interchange materials. . . . At that time the other way of getting hold of magazines and so forth was the ones left behind by tourists or visiting relatives in hotels. People would laminate them so they lasted longer and rent them out. . . . At the same time cassette tapes started to circulate, and my grandfather exchanged all 200 of his books for eight VHS tapes. People loved that you could watch something more than once, and from that moment the business started to grow. All of the sections you now see on *el paquete*, like sport and soap operas, started out on the cassettes, and just like you go to the film banks now, you could go and rent out a tape.¹

Throughout the 1980s, ship workers, touring musicians, and plane pilots would bring in Betamax tapes from abroad either to sell or to rent out: word would go around as to who had what, and people would copy their own versions.² In 1991 the Cuban government installed an antenna on the roof of the Hotel Habana Libre so that tourists and diplomats could watch ten American channels, and locals quickly found a way to catch and repeat the signal in the neighborhood and record shows to sell on to others. The Cuban diaspora in Miami also made the most of this development and started broadcasting radio and television programs through satellite dishes facing out across the sea, in the hope of transmitting alternative sources of news to the island.³ This practice continues to this day, with many of the more affluent Havana households owning a parabolic antenna to catch the signal from Spanish-speaking channels in nearby South Florida. Some also repeat the signal to their neighbors and make a profit in the process by charging a monthly fee.

Structure and Content of *el Paquete*

Although much of *el paquete*'s content originally came from abroad, smuggled into Cuba in suitcases and backpacks, nowadays most of the content is actually downloaded in Havana itself. Some is downloaded through special internet accounts granted to university staff, party members, and the like, which are less restricted, while the rest is downloaded on hotel or private computers through the night, when the available bandwidth is typically greater. The *matrices* (headquarters) of the major producers and distributors of *el paquete* now have sufficient technical equipment to be able to copy multiple files at the same time, enabling them to reproduce *el paquete* on a mass scale that was impossible even just a few short years ago. These are then sent across the island with pilots, bus drivers, and so forth, to be copied further in "the provinces."

Meanwhile, as production of *el paquete* has centralized into four major "houses" or *matrices*, local artists, filmmakers, and journalists have been able to insert materials into these networks of distribution, and local businesses

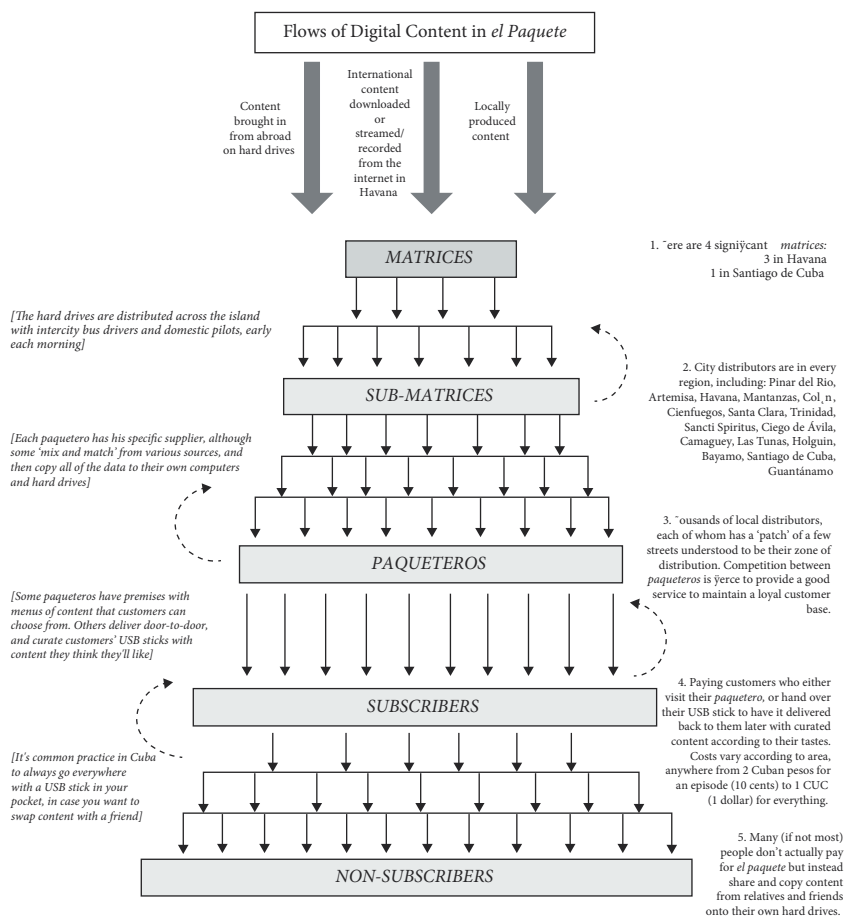


FIGURE 1. Diagram showing flows of digital content into and across the paquete network.

and musicians have also started directly paying the *matrices* to include their own content. Inclusion of promotional materials starts from around 30 CUC (US\$30) a month.⁴ In this way, content on *el paquete* is not solely foreign; it now contains domestically produced contributions too. In a *paquete* that went out on April 1, 2019, for example, almost 5 percent of the content (approximately 40 gigabytes) had been created on the island itself. International content is also not necessarily solely American; in fact, Asian programs (such as Korean *dorama*, Turkish soap operas, and Japanese *manga* and *anime*) are increasingly popular, as are other Latin American genres such as Mexican and Brazilian *telenovelas* (see also Farrell, this issue).

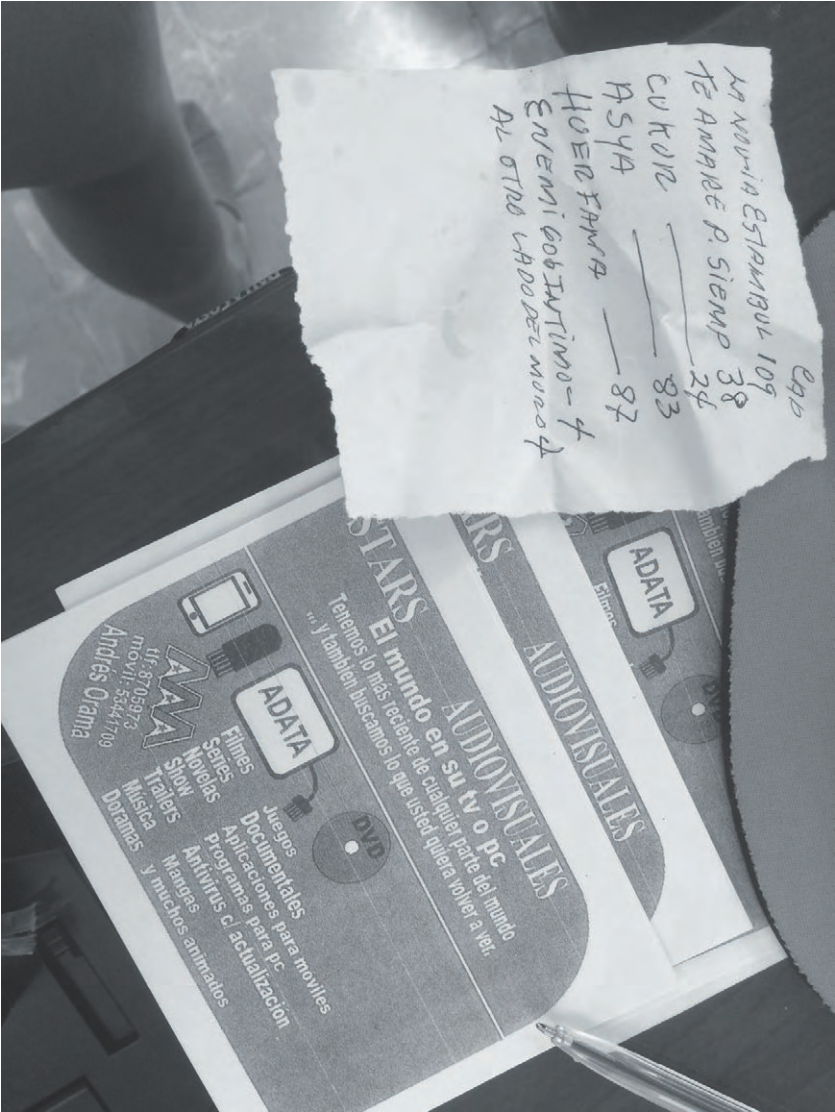


FIGURE 2. Handwritten order form requesting particular episodes of various shows, alongside an advert for “the world on your TV or PC: We have the most recent shows from anywhere in the world . . . and we can also look for anything you want to see again” in a paquetero’s office. Author’s photo, Havana, March 2018.

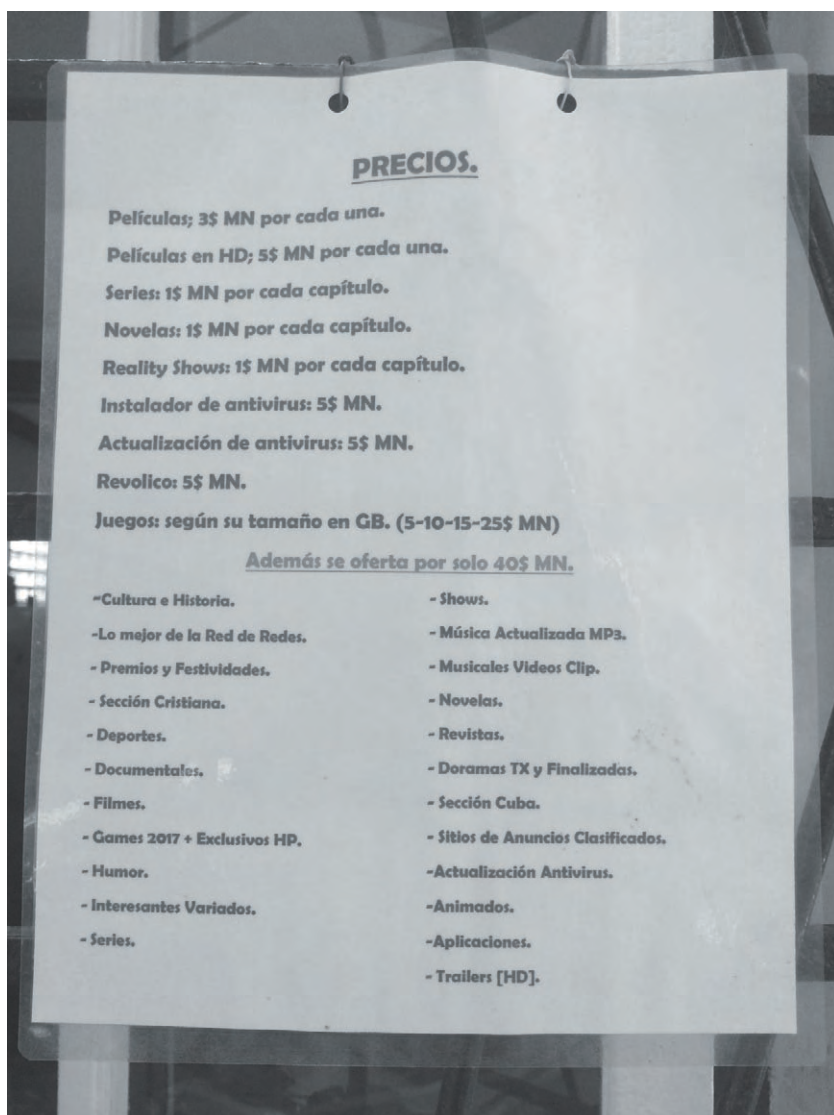


FIGURE 3. Price list displayed in the window of a paquetero's home in El Cerro, Havana. Author's photo, March 2018.

A Parallel Internet

Although *el paquete* has attracted considerable attention from across the world for being an ingenious response to limited internet access, it has also become a trope of the increasing fetishization of Cuba as an analog or “digital detox” destination. “Step back in time,” we are invited, “and leave the stresses of modern life behind” (“Rest, Relaxation & Digital Detox” 2019), while in Cuba, “where Wi-Fi is both slow and terrible, you will be an emissary from the future, a hint of the degeneracy to come” (García Martínez 2017). *El paquete* has meanwhile been hailed by foreigners as “the internet distilled down to its purest, most consumable, and least interactive form” (García Martínez 2017). Presumably such accounts here take *interactive* to mean merely “clickable,” as the structure and circulation of *el paquete* clearly relies heavily on social interaction, as already demonstrated. To Cubans, nonetheless, *el paquete* is distinct from the internet as the wider world might know it. The internet (in the sense of the World Wide Web, provided in Cuba by the state-owned company ETECSA) is slow, expensive, and is used for communication purposes alone: either for email or internet calls to friends and relatives overseas. *El paquete*, meanwhile, is a source of information, entertainment, and most importantly, a network of social relations. USB sticks assume the role of “social portable libraries of Cuban identity, where librarians are a latticework of social networks of friends and trusted colleagues” (Astley 2016, 16).

As Daniel Miller and Heather Horst point out in their manifesto for a digital anthropology, “the importance of cultural relativism and the global nature of our encounter with the digital” is to negate “assumptions that the digital is necessarily homogenizing,” and thus a digital anthropological lens onto such phenomena as *el paquete* might allow us to explore “the illusions we retain of a non-mediated, noncultural, predigital world” (Miller and Horst 2012, 3–12). No digital technology exists outside of networks that include analogue and other media technologies, and Cuba’s *paquete* is a prime example of how digital practices are extensions of preexisting social and material worlds, constructed by agents who are situated in cultural specificities. Perhaps most striking about *el paquete* as a digital network is its visible reliance upon the material, which is so often presented as juxtaposed to the digital or virtual nature of the online world. Often, especially when working smoothly, the materiality of the digital remains invisible to the user, yet, as danah boyd (2011, 37) emphasizes, “the architecture of a particular environment matters,” and nowhere more visibly (or tangibly) than in the case of Cuba.

Vincente Morin Aguado (2015) has seen USBs in Cuba as “the people’s Internet,” but *el paquete* would perhaps be better understood as a parallel internet which has developed in its own techno-social and economic setting. There was nothing predetermined in the 1990s about the way the World Wide Web

would develop to become a product through which users' personal data are harnessed and remobilized for the financial gain of large corporations (Zuboff 2019); nor is there anything inevitable about the proposal that Cuba's internet will morph into the identical sibling of Google "when things change" (Johnstone 2019). Indeed, *el paquete* arguably harnesses some features of what the wider world knows as the Internet; its success and profit is also mediated by the harnessing of social data for commercial gain, only in this case, face-to-face knowledge of customers by astute *paqueteros* who serve their surrounding neighborhood. Yet in other regards it manifests itself differently; notions of ownership and property are distinct, as are conceptualizations of authentic or original content, and perhaps too normative ideas of "appropriate" interface of state and citizen through mutual surveillance. As my Cuban friend Carlos once put it to me after a few beers, "You all get so high and mighty about your free internet, but do you think Google is any different? They watch every move you make, and they profit from it. So it's all a matter of perspective." He also pointed out that while I was barred from sharing the apps I had paid to download onto my phone with him, through *el paquete* and similar social sharing networks across the island, Cubans had in fact found a way to promote a greater degree of mass ownership.

In this light, *el paquete* can be considered a situated response to a particular moment in time, where private business licenses are obtainable and yet material (and digital) things still often circulate through older networks of distribution which were consolidated under socialism. *El paquete* has rendered visible an emerging public space in the Cuban landscape: exchange of information and materials has always been mediated through social relationships in Cuba and beyond, but this process has now manifested in new channels of circulation. *El paquete* represents an "opportunity to synchronise with trends and conversations outside the island" (Laguna 2017, 159), but also arguably within the island, which is equally as potent. The transformative power of the internet as interpreted in the wider world is "not that it allows access to information, but rather that it provides a public venue that allows ordinary people to . . . tell their own stories, to recontextualise existing knowledge and official narratives, and to create their own social networks for sharing ideas" (Bernal 2014, 9). If in "Western countries," or the Global North, the digital phenomenon has often been accused of generating alienation among users (Gershon 2010; Turkle 2011), in Cuba, digital access (via *el paquete* more so than online access) "implies a series of private and relational practices that have contributed to the appropriation of public space by citizens" (Liosi 2017). Indeed, this nascent national public space has galvanized and mobilized new discourses across the island, as has been the case for my friend Nestor, whose own artistic work tells us that "*el paquete* is, in fact, the Cuban public space today and that

a gallery as well as a public space should be imagined outside the boundaries of the political and cultural elites” (Mónica 2017; see also Cearn, this issue).

Introduction to Dossier

This dossier draws together various aspects of *el paquete* and media-sharing practices in Cuba today, focusing on the way new and old communities alike are created, perpetuated, and redefined through emerging digital networks and practices. From its promotion of international content and language-learning materials to the generation of new music genres, independent journalism and visual art, the articles in this dossier together consider *el paquete*’s wider impact in both domestic and transnational Cuban communities, and what this might mean in an island of supposedly centralized and state-dominated media.

The contributions each address a specific aspect of what is not one but many phenomena associated with *el paquete*. Ted A. Henken provides a comparative study of the political ecology of competing digital media projects, considering how the *paquete* as well as rival media networks on the island contribute to a growing public space for independent journalists and media outlets. Mike Levine brings us an analysis of how the representation of race and marginality in the platform is negotiated by its different stakeholders, and the way emerging sub-genres of music are shared horizontally courtesy of Cuba’s emerging media sharing platforms, challenging top-down hegemonic systems of reproduction and distribution in audiovisual media. Jennifer Cearn reconsiders Cuban connectivity with the “outside world” by showcasing the transnational networks operating behind and through the *paquete* phenomenon, and positions these ideas within discussions of copyright, media piracy across the Global South and notions of ownership within ideologies of socialism and capitalism. Finally, Michelle Leigh Farrell contributes an exploration of how *el paquete* fits into a wider hegemonic landscape of media distribution both in Cuba and internationally in her comparison of the *paquete* with both Cuban state-produced media distribution networks and international corporate giants such as Netflix.

There is much to be gained by bringing such work together to prompt a wider discussion exploring the interrelation between different disciplinary perspectives on the phenomenon of *el paquete* in Cuba, and the distribution and curating of media more generally. This interdisciplinary dossier draws together a wide array of current scholarship and research into digital sharing practices and media in Cuba and its diaspora, and should be of interest and relevance to scholars and students of anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, sociology, journalism, migration studies, and Latinx studies. Together, the articles highlight how, in spite of hegemonizing and colonializing characterizations of

Cuba's digital sphere of production as somehow "backward" or limited, everyday Cubans in fact assert considerable agency not only in producing content on the island but also in mobilizing Cuban media across transnational circuits. All the articles demonstrate how the *paquete* is in fact galvanizing the rise of new media forms, genres, and voices, the likes of which can arguably challenge both domestic and international hegemonic models of media production, along with our own wider understandings of a digital public space offering new possibilities that are not peripheral but indeed central to cultural production in the modern age.

In this regard, this dossier sets out to re-orientate discussions that focus on a sense of lack in Cuba's digital presence to instead focus on the possibilities for inventiveness, entrepreneurship, creativity, and counterhegemonies that evidently abound in digital Cuban communities and networks. It also considers Cuban media-sharing practices within their historical context and situates the Cuban case within broader discussions of developing economies and Global South connectivity, media piracy in Latin America and beyond, and broader theoretical questions of ownership and sharing within ideologies of state socialism and capitalism.

NOTES

1. Interview with author, Havana, February 2018. Film banks, or *bancos de discos*, are readily visible in Cuba and sell pirated DVDs among other things.
2. Betamax was an analog cassette-recording device popular through the 1970s and 1980s before the invention of VHS, which has been replaced by DVDs and Blu-ray technology.
3. For example, in the early 1980s, the US government planned to create a radio station known as Radio Free Cuba, in the hope of hastening the fall of Fidel Castro. The station—renamed Radio Martí after Cuban independence fighter José Martí—was established in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan and continues running to the present day, along with a sister television station.
4. Although it's worth noting that some of my interlocutors had started pulling out of such contracts, as—given the number of *paqueteros* who cut materials out of the *paquete* judging them not to be of interest to their local customers—it was becoming increasingly difficult to ensure the promotions would arrive on the end consumer's USB stick.

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