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U.S. secretly created 'Cuban Twitter' to stir unrest

WASHINGTON — In July 2010, Joe McSpedon, a U.S. government official, flew to Barcelona to put the final touches on a secret plan to build a social media project aimed at undermining Cuba's communist government.

McSpedon and his team of high-tech contractors had come in from Costa Rica and Nicaragua, Washington and Denver. Their mission: to launch a messaging network that could reach hundreds of thousands of Cubans. To hide the network from the Cuban government, they would set up a byzantine system of front companies using a Cayman Islands bank account, and recruit unsuspecting executives who would not be told of the company's ties to the U.S. government.

McSpedon didn't work for the CIA. This was a program paid for and run by the U.S. Agency for International Development, best known for overseeing billions of dollars in U.S. humanitarian aid.

[VIDEO](#)

[Reacting to an AP story, White House press secretary Jay Carney defended the USAID "twitter-like" program in Cuba, saying the program was a development program and not covert. \(Associated Press\)](#)

According to documents obtained by The Associated Press and multiple interviews with people involved in the project, the plan was to develop a bare-bones "Cuban Twitter," using cellphone text messaging to evade Cuba's strict control of information and its stranglehold restrictions over the Internet. In a play on Twitter, it was called ZunZuneo — slang for a Cuban hummingbird's tweet.

Documents show the U.S. government planned to build a subscriber base through "non-controversial content": news messages on soccer, music, and hurricane updates. Later when the network reached a critical mass of subscribers, perhaps hundreds of thousands, operators would introduce political content aimed at inspiring Cubans to organize "smart mobs" — mass gatherings called at a moment's notice that might trigger a Cuban Spring, or, as one USAID document put it, "renegotiate the balance of power between the state and society."

At its peak, the project drew in more than 40,000 Cubans to share news and exchange opinions. But its subscribers were never aware it was created by the U.S. government, or that American contractors were gathering their private data in the hope that it might be used for political purposes.

"There will be absolutely no mention of United States government involvement," according to a 2010 memo from Mobile Accord, one of the project's contractors. "This is absolutely crucial for the long-term success of the service and to ensure the success of the Mission."

The program's legality is unclear: U.S. law requires that any covert action by a federal agency must have a presidential authorization. Officials at USAID would not say who had approved the program or whether the White House was aware of it. McSpedon, the most senior official named in the documents obtained by the AP, is a mid-level manager who declined to comment.

USAID spokesman Matt Herrick said the agency is proud of its Cuba programs and noted that

congressional investigators reviewed them last year and found them to be consistent with U.S. law.

"USAID is a development agency, not an intelligence agency, and we work all over the world to help people exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms, and give them access to tools to improve their lives and connect with the outside world," he said.

"In the implementation," he added, "has the government taken steps to be discreet in non-permissive environments? Of course. That's how you protect the practitioners and the public. In hostile environments, we often take steps to protect the partners we're working with on the ground. This is not unique to Cuba."

But the ZunZuneo program muddies those claims, a sensitive issue for its mission to promote democracy and deliver aid to the world's poor and vulnerable — which requires the trust of foreign governments.

"On the face of it there are several aspects about this that are troubling," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. and chairman of the Appropriations Committee's State Department and foreign operations subcommittee.

"There is the risk to young, unsuspecting Cuban cellphone users who had no idea this was a U.S. government-funded activity. There is the clandestine nature of the program that was not disclosed to the appropriations subcommittee with oversight responsibility. And there is the disturbing fact that it apparently activated shortly after Alan Gross, a USAID subcontractor who was sent to Cuba to help provide citizens access to the Internet, was arrested."

The Associated Press obtained more than 1,000 pages of documents about the project's development. The AP independently verified the project's scope and details in the documents — such as federal contract numbers and names of job candidates — through publicly available databases, government sources and interviews with those directly involved in ZunZuneo.

Taken together, they tell the story of how agents of the U.S. government, working in deep secrecy, became tech entrepreneurs — in Cuba. And it all began with a half a million cellphone numbers obtained from a communist government.

ZunZuneo would seem to be a throwback from the Cold War, and the decades-long struggle between the United States and Cuba. It came at a time when the historically sour relationship between the countries had improved, at least marginally, and Cuba had made tentative steps toward a more market-based economy.

It is unclear whether the plan got its start with USAID or Creative Associates International, a Washington, D.C., for-profit company that has earned hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. contracts. But a "key contact" at Cubacel, the state-owned cellphone provider, slipped the phone numbers to a Cuban engineer living in Spain. The engineer provided the numbers to USAID and Creative Associates "free of charge," documents show.

In mid-2009, Noy Villalobos, a manager with Creative Associates who had worked with USAID in the 1990s on a program to eradicate drug crops, started an IM chat with her little brother in Nicaragua, according to a Creative Associates email that captured the conversation. Mario Bernheim, in his mid-20s, was an up-and-coming techie who had made a name for himself as a computer whiz.

“This is very confidential of course,” Villalobos cautioned her brother. But what could you do if you had all the cellphone numbers of a particular country? Could you send bulk text messages without the government knowing?

“Can you encrypt it or something?” she texted.

She was looking for a direct line to regular Cubans through text messaging. Most had precious little access to news from the outside world. The government viewed the Internet as an Achilles’ heel and controlled it accordingly. A communications minister had even referred to it as a “wild colt” that “should be tamed.”

Yet in the years since Fidel Castro handed over power to his brother Raul, Cuba had sought to jumpstart the long stagnant economy. Raul Castro began encouraging cellphone use, and hundreds of thousands of people were suddenly using mobile phones for the first time, though smartphones with access to the Internet remained restricted.

Cubans could text message, though at a high cost in a country where the average wage was a mere \$20 a month.

Bernheim told his sister that he could figure out a way to send instant texts to hundreds of thousands of Cubans— for cheap. It could not be encrypted though, because that would be too complicated. They wouldn’t be able to hide the messages from the Cuban government, which owned Cubacel. But they could disguise who was sending the texts by constantly switching the countries the messages came from.

“We could rotate it from different countries?” Villalobos asked. “Say one message from Nica, another from Spain, another from Mexico”?

Bernheim could do that. “But I would need mirrors set up around the world, mirrors, meaning the same computer, running with the same platform, with the same phone.”

“No hay problema,” he signed off. No problem.

After the chat, Creative hired Bernheim as a subcontractor, reporting to his sister. (Villalobos and Bernheim would later confirm their involvement with the ZunZuneo project to AP, but decline further comment.) Bernheim, in turn, signed up the Cuban engineer who had gotten the phone list. The team figured out how to message the masses without detection, but their ambitions were bigger.

Creative Associates envisioned using the list to create a social networking system that would be called “Proyecto ZZ,” or “Project ZZ.” The service would start cautiously and be marketed chiefly to young Cubans, who USAID saw as the most open to political change.

“We should gradually increase the risk,” USAID proposed in a document. It advocated using “smart mobs” only in “critical/opportunistic situations and not at the detriment of our core platform-based network.”

USAID’s team of contractors and subcontractors built a companion Web site to its text service so Cubans could subscribe, give feedback and send their own text messages for free. They talked about how to make the Web site look like a real business. “Mock ad banners will give it the

appearance of a commercial enterprise," a proposal suggested.

In multiple documents, USAID staff pointed out that text messaging had mobilized smart mobs and political uprisings in Moldova and the Philippines, among others. In Iran, the USAID noted social media's role following the disputed election of then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009 — and saw it as an important foreign policy tool.

USAID documents say their strategic objective in Cuba was to "push it out of a stalemate through tactical and temporary initiatives, and get the transition process going again towards democratic change." Democratic change in authoritarian Cuba meant breaking the Castros' grip on power.

USAID divided Cuban society into five segments depending on loyalty to the government. On one side sat the "democratic movement," called "still (largely) irrelevant," and at the other end were the "hard-core system supporters," dubbed "Talibanes" in a derogatory comparison to Afghan and Pakistani extremists.

A key question was how to move more people toward the democratic activist camp without detection. Bernheim assured the team that wouldn't be a problem.

"The Cuban government, like other regimes committed to information control, currently lacks the capacity to effectively monitor and control such a service," Bernheim wrote in a proposal for USAID marked "Sensitive Information."

ZunZuneo would use the list of phone numbers to break Cuba's Internet embargo and not only deliver information to Cubans but also let them interact with each other in a way the government could not control. Eventually it would build a system that would let Cubans send messages anonymously among themselves.

At a strategy meeting, the company discussed building "user volume as a cover ... for organization," according to meeting notes. It also suggested that the "Landscape needs to be large enough to hide full opposition members who may sign up for service."

In a play on the telecommunication minister's quote, the team dubbed their network the "untamed colt."

At first, the ZunZuneo team operated out of Central America. Bernheim, the techie brother, worked from Nicaragua's capital, Managua, while McSpedon supervised Creative's work on ZunZuneo from an office in San Jose, Costa Rica, though separate from the U.S. embassy. It was an unusual arrangement that raised eyebrows in Washington, according to U.S. officials.

McSpedon worked for USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), a division that was created after the fall of the Soviet Union to promote U.S. interests in quickly changing political environments — without the usual red tape.

In 2009, a report by congressional researchers warned that OTI's work "often lends itself to political entanglements that may have diplomatic implications." Staffers on oversight committees complained that USAID was running secret programs and would not provide details.

"We were told we couldn't even be told in broad terms what was happening because 'people will die,'" said Fulton Armstrong, who worked for the Senate Foreign Relations committee. Before that, he was the US intelligence community's most senior analyst on Latin America, advising the Clinton White House

WHITE HOUSE.

The money that Creative Associates spent on ZunZuneo was publicly earmarked for an unspecified project in Pakistan, government data show. But there is no indication of where the funds were actually spent.

Tensions with Congress spiked just as the ZunZuneo project was gearing up in December 2009, when another USAID program ended in the arrest of the U.S. contractor, Alan Gross. Gross had traveled repeatedly to Cuba on a secret mission to expand Internet access using sensitive technology typically available only to governments, a mission first revealed in February 2012 by AP.

At some point, Armstrong says, the foreign relations committee became aware of OTI's secret operations in Costa Rica. U.S. government officials acknowledged them privately to Armstrong, but USAID refused to provide operational details.

At an event in Washington, Armstrong says he confronted McSpedon, asking him if he was aware that by operating secret programs from a third country, it might appear like he worked for an intelligence agency.

McSpedon, through USAID, said the story is not true. He declined to comment otherwise.

On Sept. 20, 2009, thousands of Cubans gathered at Revolution Plaza in Havana for Colombian rocker Juanes' "Peace without Borders" concert. It was the largest public gathering in Cuba since the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998. Under the watchful gaze of a giant sculpture of revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Miami-based Juanes promised music aimed at "turning hate into love."

But for the ZunZuneo team, the concert was a perfect opportunity to test the political power of their budding social network. In the weeks before, Bernheim's firm, using the phone list, sent out a half a million text messages in what it called "blasts," to test what the Cuban government would do.

The team hired Alen Lauzan Falcon, a Havana-born satirical artist based in Chile, to write Cuban-style messages. Some were mildly political and comical, others more pointed. One asked respondents whether they thought two popular local music acts out of favor with the government should join the stage with Juanes. Some 100,000 people responded — not realizing the poll was used to gather critical intelligence.

Paula Cambronerero, a researcher for Mobile Accord, began building a vast database about the Cuban subscribers, including gender, age, "receptiveness" and "political tendencies." USAID believed the demographics on dissent could help it target its other Cuba programs and "maximize our possibilities to extend our reach."

Cambronerero concluded that the team had to be careful. "Messages with a humorous connotation should not contain a strong political tendency, so as not to create animosity in the recipients," she wrote in a report.

Falcon, in an interview, said he was never told that he was composing messages for a U.S. government program, but he had no regrets about his involvement.

"They didn't tell me anything, and if they had, I would have done it anyway," he said. "In Cuba they

don't have freedom. While a government forces me to pay in order to visit my country, makes me ask permission, and limits my communications, I will be against it, whether it's Fidel Castro, (Cuban exile leader) Jorge Mas Canosa or Gloria Estefan," the Cuban American singer.

Carlos Sanchez Almeida, a lawyer specializing in European data protection law, said it appeared that the U.S. program violated Spanish privacy laws because the ZunZuneo team had illegally gathered personal data from the phone list and sent unsolicited emails using a Spanish platform. "The illegal release of information is a crime, and using information to create a list of people by political affiliation is totally prohibited by Spanish law," Almeida said. It would violate a U.S.-European data protection agreement, he said.

USAID saw evidence from server records that Havana had tried to trace the texts, to break into ZunZuneo's servers, and had occasionally blocked messages. But USAID called the response "timid" and concluded that ZunZuneo would be viable — if its origins stayed secret.

Even though Cuba has one of the most sophisticated counter-intelligence operations in the world, the ZunZuneo team thought that as long as the message service looked benign, Cubacel would leave it alone.

Once the network had critical mass, Creative and USAID documents argued, it would be harder for the Cuban government to shut it down, both because of popular demand and because Cubacel would be addicted to the revenues from the text messages.

In February 2010, the company introduced Cubans to ZunZuneo and began marketing. Within six months, it had almost 25,000 subscribers, growing faster and drawing more attention than the USAID team could control.

Saimi Reyes Carmona was a journalism student at the University of Havana when she stumbled onto ZunZuneo. She was intrigued by the service's novelty, and the price. The advertisement said "free messages" so she signed up using her nickname, Saimita.

At first, ZunZuneo was a very tiny platform, Reyes said during a recent interview in Havana, but one day she went to its Web site and saw its services had expanded.

"I began sending one message every day," she said, the maximum allowed at the start. "I didn't have practically any followers." She was thrilled every time she got a new one.

And then ZunZuneo exploded in popularity.

"The whole world wanted in, and in a question of months I had 2,000 followers who I have no idea who they are, nor where they came from."

She let her followers know the day of her birthday, and was surprised when she got some 15 personal messages. "This is the coolest thing I've ever seen!" she told her boyfriend, Ernesto Guerra Valdes, also a journalism student.

Before long, Reyes learned she had the second highest number of followers on the island, after a user called UCI, which the students figured was Havana's University of Computer Sciences. Her boyfriend had 1,000. The two were amazed at the reach it gave them.

"It was such a marvelous thing," Guerra said. "So noble." He and Reyes tried to figure out who was behind ZunZuneo, since the technology to run it had to be expensive, but they found nothing

penina ZunZuneo, since the technology to run it had to be expensive, but they found nothing. They were grateful though.

"We always found it strange, that generosity and kindness," he said. ZunZuneo was "the fairy godmother of cellphones."

By early 2010, Creative decided that ZunZuneo was so popular Bernheim's company wasn't sophisticated enough to build, in effect, "a scaled down version of Twitter."

It turned to another young techie, James Eberhard, CEO of Denver-based Mobile Accord Inc. Eberhard had pioneered the use of text messaging for donations during disasters and had raised tens of millions of dollars after the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Eberhard earned millions in his mid-20s when he sold a company that developed cellphone ring tones and games. His company's Web site describes him as "a visionary within the global mobile community."

In July, he flew to Barcelona to join McSpedon, Bernheim, and others to work out what they called a "below the radar strategy."

"If it is discovered that the platform is, or ever was, backed by the United States government, not only do we risk the channel being shut down by Cubacel, but we risk the credibility of the platform as a source of reliable information, education, and empowerment in the eyes of the Cuban people," Mobile Accord noted in a memo.

To cover their tracks, they decided to have a company based in the United Kingdom set up a corporation in Spain to run ZunZuneo. A separate company called MovilChat was created in the Cayman Islands, a well-known offshore tax haven, with an account at the island's Bank of N.T. Butterfield & Son Ltd. to pay the bills.

A memo of the meeting in Barcelona says that the front companies would distance ZunZuneo from any U.S. ownership so that the "money trail will not trace back to America."

But it wasn't just the money they were worried about. They had to hide the origins of the texts, according to documents and interviews with team members.

Brad Blanken, the former chief operating officer of Mobile Accord, left the project early on, but noted that there were two main criteria for success.

"The biggest challenge with creating something like this is getting the phone numbers," Blanken said. "And then the ability to spoof the network."

The team of contractors set up servers in Spain and Ireland to process texts, contracting an independent Spanish company called Lleida.net to send the text messages back to Cuba, while stripping off identifying data.

Mobile Accord also sought intelligence from engineers at the Spanish telecommunications company Telefonica, which organizers said would "have knowledge of Cubacel's network."

"Understanding the security and monitoring protocols of Cubacel will be an invaluable asset to avoid unnecessary detection by the carrier," one Mobile Accord memo read.

Officials at USAID realized however, that they could not conceal their involvement forever.

Officials at USAID realized however, that they could not conceal their involvement forever — unless they left the stage. The predicament was summarized bluntly when Eberhard was in Washington for a strategy session in early February 2011, where his company noted the “inherent contradiction” of giving Cubans a platform for communications uninfluenced by their government that was in fact financed by the U.S. government and influenced by its agenda.

They turned to Jack Dorsey, a co-founder of Twitter, to seek funding for the project. Documents show Dorsey met with Suzanne Hall, a State Department officer who worked on social media projects, and others. Dorsey declined to comment.

The State Department under then-Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton thought social media was an important tool in diplomacy. At a 2011 speech at George Washington University, Clinton said the U.S. helped people in “oppressive Internet environments get around filters.” In Tunisia, she said people used technology to “organize and share grievances, which, as we know, helped fuel a movement that led to revolutionary change.”

Ultimately, the solution was new management that could separate ZunZuneo from its U.S. origins and raise enough revenue for it to go “independent,” even as it kept its long-term strategy to bring about “democratic change.”

Eberhard led the recruitment efforts, a sensitive operation because he intended to keep the management of the Spanish company in the dark.

“The ZZ management team will have no knowledge of the true origin of the operation; as far as they know, the platform was established by Mobile Accord,” the memo said. “There should be zero doubt in management’s mind and no insecurities or concerns about United States Government involvement.”

The memo went on to say that the CEO’s clean conscience would be “particularly critical when dealing with Cubacel.” Sensitive to the high cost of text messages for average Cubans, ZunZuneo negotiated a bulk rate for texts at 4 cents a pop through a Spanish intermediary. Documents show there was hope that an earnest, clueless CEO might be able to persuade Cubacel to back the project.

Mobile Accord considered a dozen candidates from five countries to head the Spanish front company. One of them was Francoise de Valera, a CEO who was vacationing in Dubai when she was approached for an interview. She flew to Barcelona. At the luxury Mandarin Oriental Hotel, she met with Nim Patel, who at the time was Mobile Accord’s president. Eberhard had also flown in for the interviews. But she said she couldn’t get a straight answer about what they were looking for.

“They talked to me about instant messaging but nothing about Cuba, or the United States,” she told the AP in an interview from London.

“If I had been offered and accepted the role, I believe that sooner or later it would have become apparent to me that something wasn’t right,” she said.

By early 2011, Creative Associates grew exasperated with Mobile Accord’s failure to make ZunZuneo self-sustaining and independent of the U.S. government. The operation had run into an unsolvable problem. USAID was paying tens of thousands of dollars in text messaging fees to Cuba’s communist telecommunications monopoly routed through a secret bank account and front

companies. It was not a situation that it could either afford or justify — and if exposed it would be embarrassing, or worse.

In a searing evaluation, Creative Associates said Mobile Accord had ignored sustainability because “it has felt comfortable receiving USG financing to move the venture forward.”

Out of 60 points awarded for performance, Mobile Accord scored 34 points. Creative Associates complained that Mobile Accord’s understanding of the social mission of the project was weak, and gave it 3 out of 10 points for “commitment to our Program goals.”

Mobile Accord declined to comment on the program.

In increasingly impatient tones, Creative Associates pressed Mobile Accord to find new revenue that would pay the bills. Mobile Accord suggested selling targeted advertisements in Cuba, but even with projections of up to a million ZunZuneo subscribers, advertising in a state-run economy would amount to a pittance.

By March 2011, ZunZuneo had about 40,000 subscribers. To keep a lower profile, it abandoned previous hopes of reaching 200,000 and instead capped the number of subscribers at a lower number. It limited ZunZuneo’s text messages to less than one percent of the total in Cuba, so as to avoid the notice of Cuban authorities. Though one former ZunZuneo worker — who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about his work — said the Cubans were catching on and had tried to block the site.

Toward the middle of 2012, Cuban users began to complain that the service worked only sporadically. Then not at all.

ZunZuneo vanished as mysteriously as it appeared.

By June 2012, users who had access to Facebook and Twitter were wondering what had happened.

“Where can you pick up messages from ZunZuneo?” one woman asked on Facebook in November 2012. “Why aren’t I receiving them anymore?”

Users who went to ZunZuneo’s Web site were sent to a children’s Web site with a similar name.

Reyner Aguero, a 25-year-old blogger, said he and fellow students at Havana’s University of Computer Sciences tried to track it down. Someone had rerouted the Web site through DNS blocking, a censorship technique initially developed back in the 1990s. Intelligence officers later told the students that ZunZuneo was blacklisted, he said.

“ZunZuneo, like everything else they did not control, was a threat,” Aguero said. “Period.”

In incorrect Spanish, ZunZuneo posted a note on its Facebook page saying it was aware of problems accessing the Web site and that it was trying to resolve them.

“ ¡Que viva el ZunZuneo!” the message said. Long live ZunZuneo!

In February, when Saimi Reyes, and her boyfriend, Ernesto Guerra, learned the origins of ZunZuneo, they were stunned.

“How was I supposed to realize that?” Guerra asked. “It’s not like there was a sign saying

How was I supposed to realize that? Guerra asked. It's not like there was a sign saying 'Welcome to ZunZuneo, brought to you by USAID.'

"Besides, there was nothing wrong. If I had started getting subversive messages or death threats or 'Everyone into the streets,'" he laughed, "I would have said, 'OK,' there's something fishy about this. But nothing like that happened."

USAID says the program ended when the money ran out. The Cuban government declined to comment.

The former web domain is now a placeholder, for sale for \$299. The registration for MovilChat, the Cayman Islands front company, was set to expire on March 31.

In Cuba, nothing has come close to replacing it. Internet service still is restricted.

"The moment when ZunZuneo disappeared was like a vacuum," Guerra said. "People texted my phone, 'What is happening with ZunZuneo?'"

"In the end, we never learned what happened," he said. "We never learned where it came from."

Contributing to this report were Associated Press researcher Monika Mathur in Washington, and AP writers Andrea Rodriguez and Peter Orsi in Havana. Arce reported from Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

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Sent from my iPhone

