

6-22-2006

Cuba Criticized For Limiting Citizen's Internet Access, But Us Prevents Hookup

Mike Leffert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "Cuba Criticized For Limiting Citizen's Internet Access, But Us Prevents Hookup." (2006).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9423>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Cuba Criticized For Limiting Citizen's Internet Access, But Us Prevents Hookup

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2006-06-22

In accordance with its blockade policy, the US has blocked Cuba's access to a fiber-optic cable that would permit wider, faster, and broader access to the Internet. Use of the cable would also be far cheaper for the island and provide better quality service. Cuba is now constrained to use satellite service, which delivers lower quality at a much higher cost.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is the agency responsible for the move. The OFAC also maintains vigilance of Cuban Internet traffic to monitor and prevent electronic financial transactions that violate blockade policy. At the same time, the US has vociferously criticized Cuba's restraint of citizens' access to the Internet as another example of lack of freedom on the island. Cuban officials were quick to attack that position.

"In 2003, the United States created a war strategy in cyberspace," said Rosa Miriam Elizalde of Cubadebate.com, an online publication of Cuban journalists. "In a secret document revealed some months ago, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that the Pentagon was going to use the Internet as if it were a weapon of war."

The US has pressed the Organization of American States (OAS) to criticize Cuba's Internet-access policy, and, on June 20, an official organ of the State Department, The Washington File, issued a news release saying that OAS human rights official Ignacio Alvarez "observes with concern" a Cuban decree, Access to the World Computer Network from Cuba, which is "incompatible with the right to freedom of expression. Alvarez was appointed OAS rapporteur on freedom of expression in March.

The OAS report was made in connection with the case of the director of the Cubanacan Press Guillermo Farinas, who has been on a hunger strike since January to protest the lack of Internet access. According to reports, however, Farina has been offered Internet access by officials of the telecommunications company, but he has refused. An Internet search turned up a single dispatch from Cubanacan, but Reporters Without Borders, an anti-Cuban-government media watchdog group, reported, "Until 23 January, the journalists working for Cubanacan were able to send their dispatches from a public Internet access center in the central city of Santa Clara, but since then they have been prevented. Cubanacan Press concentrates on covering human rights violations in Cuba and on reflecting viewpoints that are excluded from the official media."

The digital disparity

Meanwhile, Cuban media deny that limited access to the Internet is a matter of freedom. "What is important to understand," says Agencia de Informacion Nacional (AIN), "is the digital disparity

between the First and Third Worlds, a situation greatly worsened on the island because of Washington's economic blockade. In addition to financial restraints increasingly being placed on Cuba by Washington, the island is not allowed to connect to underwater fiber-optic cables through which the overwhelming bulk of worldwide information flows." The limitations on the country's connectivity capability, says the piece, limits the total amount of transmission possible from the island.

While the argument goes on as to whether these limitations are the result of authoritarianism or the blockade, Cuba has embarked on a campaign to increase computer literacy and to create a software industry. Computer courses, say reports, are included in the national education programs starting with first grade. There are 26 new informatics polytechnic institutions in the provinces, all equipped with the appropriate technology, with a total enrollment of 40,000 students. The first class will graduate in 2008. There is also the Universidad de Ciencias Informaticas (UCI), created in 2002.

Outside the academic sphere, there are over 600 computer clubs operating throughout the country's 169 municipalities. Says the director of the Data Business Unit of the telecommunications company, "The more we develop our Internet and more possibilities for connections, the more the service will spread nationally. This is conditioned by the cost and technological availability to Cuba, which is advancing on a yearly basis through the import of computers and making agreements with other nations. Without a doubt these are the guidelines that will make it possible for any Cuban to have Internet access."

By most estimates, Cuba could develop a computer-technology industry as formidable as its biotechnology sector. But many experts caution that attempting to develop that industry in an environment of limited Internet access could be self-defeating. William LeoGrande, a Cuba scholar and dean of the School of Public Affairs of American University in Washington, said the country could well create a world-class software industry, taking advantage of its well-educated work force, but the lack of Internet access "puts a crimp in that strategy, because so much cutting-edge information appears first on the Internet." At present, students using the Cuban intranet can take a number of software-related courses, but, without the Internet, they cannot download software, take online classes, or interact with techies on the world's message boards.

-- End --