Cubans’ Expectations Increase for Better Access to Internet, Information, and World Connection

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Cubans' Expectations Increase for Better Access to Internet, Information, and World Connection

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The Cuban populace began 2013 under the impression that the island's connection to the world was increasing thanks to the first tests of the submarine fiber-optic cable linked with Venezuela, better access to international information through Latin American television network teleSUR, and the commencement of immigration reforms that reduce foreign travel restraints (NotiCen, May 24, 2012).

The submarine cable ALBA-1 has been in operation since August 2012 for telephone service. "When the testing process concludes, the start of the cable operation does not mean that the possibilities for access will automatically multiply" for Internet access in the country, Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba SA (ETECSA) said in a recent communiqué, which also announced the need to implement investments in internal infrastructure and raise foreign-currency funds to pay for that service.

Testing on the 1,600 km cable began Jan. 10, even though it was laid from 2007 to February 2011. Delays in putting it into operation have fueled rumors of an alleged embezzlement of the project's funds. The government, which maintains a battle against corruption, still has not offered information on this issue.

Some more connected than others

The island has been connected to the Internet since 1996, and its average access speed is considered among the slowest in the Western Hemisphere. In 2011, the Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE) reported that 2.6 million residents, out of 11.2 million Cubans, have access to the network, but in reality that describes the local Intranet network, whose contents are limited and filtered by the government.

The island's precarious connection has been reason for complaints about the Internet's restricted availability to the population. The government has said repeatedly that the limitations are economic and that the country has not been able to link to other submarine cables because of the US embargo in force since 1962 (NotiCen, June 22, 2006).

Internet service has been the privileged property of state organizations, foreign offices, and international hotels, where Internet time costs US$10 to US$12, half the average monthly salary in the country. Professionals in priority sectors, such as the press, have connections in their homes, while those in health and culture have access to messaging and Intranet.

The fiber-optic cable, at a cost of US$70 million and with an output of 640 gigabytes, could offer a connection speed 3,000 times faster than the existing connection, which is through a satellite system and is painfully slow. "It takes half an hour to open a page or send a message," said a Cuban-American tourist who tried to check their US bank accounts from the Hotel Cohíba in Havana.
Reporters Without Borders (RSF) includes Cuba on its list of "Internet Enemies," countries with access problems, high content filters, tracking of cyber-dissidents, and digital propaganda. The report published on March 12, 2012, World Day Against Cyber Censorship, also included China, North Korea, Iran, and Belarus, among others.

Critics of the government say that digital isolation harms national development and have attributed it to the government's determination to keep the public ignorant of political issues. Local opposition groups, their leaders, and their demands are hardly known on the island.

Nevertheless, ease of computer ownership has improved under President Raúl Castro's administration. Computers are now sold in state-run stores and can be imported by Cuban nationals or tourists after paying customs duties. Computers can be sent to Cuba from Miami for a US$100 fee and US$7 per pound for equipment weight.

Communications has been a lucrative black-market business through the sale of illegal connections to messaging mailboxes (about US$10 per month) and the Internet (about US$50). Many Cubans boost their private businesses by advertising services for foreign tourists on Web pages.

People expect that the ALBA-1 cable will mean lower rates for telephone calls from abroad, among the most expensive in the world, usually costing more than US$1 per minute. A Skype call costs more than US$1.30 per minute.

Meanwhile, Cubans communicate with family and friends abroad via text messages using cell phones, whose large-scale service was authorized by the government in 2008 and reaches 1.68 million users, surpassing fixed-line telephone service with 1.16 million. "This country is eager to network and find out what is happening in the world," says Francisco, a university student studying history.

**TeleSUR trumps state media**

Starting Jan. 20, Cubans have been able to view live transmissions of teleSUR television network, founded in 2005, with its Latin American leftist view contrasting with the international television news networks. The local population considers teleSUR superior to Cuban television and press, which is controlled by the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) and prone to a laudatory style.

Leonel, a 42-year-old professor based in Havana, was surprised that teleSUR includes news about professional sports, varied international happenings, and details about the confrontations between the Venezuelan government and its opposition, a dynamic that communism does not allow the island, where opponents are disqualified and deemed "mercenaries" in the service of the US.

The Latin American network broadcast the second inauguration of US President Barack Obama in real time, which included the two Cuban Americans invited to participate in the ceremony: the Episcopal priest Rev. Luis León and homosexual poet Richard Blanco—an example of Washington's embracing the Hispanic community and of sexual diversity.

TeleSUR can be seen in Cuba from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and then from 8:00 p.m. until midnight. It is the first time that foreign television has been broadcast live to Cuba, where authorities launch police raids on homes where residents have placed clandestine satellite dishes on rooftops and balconies to capture broadcasts from Florida and then sell that service to their neighbors for about US$10 a month.
Rosa, a resident of the El Cerro neighborhood of Havana, sees the appearance of "anti-imperialist" teleSUR as an attempt to do away with the underground providers of Miami broadcasting. Meanwhile, private film and video banks have provided Mexican telenovelas and Hollywood films and series for years at affordable rates.

**Less complicated travel**

Accompanying the announcements about communications was the new immigration law that began on Jan. 14 and allows citizens to leave the island without having to apply for a special permit that, for half a century, discriminated against travelers and restricted their stay abroad to 11 months.

The government has streamlined delivery of passports, which cost CUC$100 (Cuban Convertible peso, about US$110). Opposition figures, previously prevented from traveling abroad, have already obtained their documents, including cyber-activist Yoani Sánchez, Havana correspondent for the Spanish newspaper El País, and Berta Soler, leader of the Damas de Blanco opposition movement.

Even government critics believe that the new provisions are a positive direction, will complement the economic reforms, and set the stage for bolder changes.

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