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Cubans Expect Better Technology, Increased Telecommunication Services with Support from U.S.

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The Cuban population hopes that the new chapter in the Washington-Havana relationship will give them access to modern computing and telecommunications devices, better international telephone rates, and expanded Internet service, which is very limited and consequently restricts private development.

The hopes for improved telecommunications are based on measures put into effect this year by President Barack Obama’s administration to ease the embargo against the communist government, in force since 1962, and respond to Cuban society’s need for more access to information, technology, and international communications. Both countries announced their willingness to begin a new stage of bilateral relations on Dec. 17, 2014.

The U.S.’s newly relaxed measures allow communication devices and computer equipment into the country, which should facilitate telecommunications, expand Internet access, and lower costs. In addition, these measures permit importations of computers, software, cell phones, TVs, memory, and recording devices through both commercial sales and donations. Several interviewees confirmed that Obama’s popularity among young Cubans has increased because of these actions.

In a communist state that still maintains strict control of the media, communication services, the press, and publishing in the 21st century, few Cubans have the luxury of the Internet, while only state-run television channels are broadcast, and foreign publications are not available. Unlimited, uncensored access to information and audiovisual materials from the outside is an obsession for many professionals and students.

For years, the Cuban government attributed its communication problems to its financial difficulties and the US embargo. Meanwhile, the fiber optic cable connecting the country with Venezuela since 2013 has not provided the desired public access to the Internet, thus increasing fears that it is official policy to keep the flow of information under lock and key.

The new relationship between Cuba and the US was possible after 18 months of secret negotiations that had at its epicenter an incident involving communications and access to information. In December 2014, the Obama administration succeeded in freeing subcontractor Alan Gross because of his failing health. Jailed in 2009 and sentenced to 15 years in prison, Gross’ crime was bringing satellite communication devices into the country and attempting to install them for Cuba’s Jewish community (NotiCen, Aug. 16, 2012, and Jan. 29, 2015).

The incident involving Gross was just one of many in the lives of Cubans, who have tried for decades to receive international television signals from Florida through the surreptitious importation and installation of satellite dishes or by making homemade reproductions using empty soft drink cans and clothes hangers to try to capture the internal television signals from international tourist hotels. It is not uncommon to see the Cuban police looking up at roofs in their quest to eliminate these rustic devices.
Nowadays the public’s greatest demand is for Internet access (NotiCen, Feb. 21, 2013). The Cuban government now recognizes the technological backwardness and limited connectivity of the country, a fact revealed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a UN agency that has set the goal that by 2020 50% of individuals in developing countries should have access to the Internet or have network access at home and that broadband services should not cost more than 5% of the average monthly income.

ITU reports indicate that only 3.4% of Cuban households had private Internet connections in 2013, one of the world’s lowest rates of connectivity and the lowest in Latin America. Cuba’s Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información (ONEI) states that, in 2013, more than 1 million computers were in use on the island, but only about 514,000 were connected to the Internet. Some analysts question these figures because they do not distinguish between local Intranet and the Internet.

Home connections are limited to professionals such as doctors, who have access to email and Intranet whose pages are designed and supplied locally under state supervision. Messages sent from these email accounts are filtered by state servers and eventually some users have received warnings from network administrators about the allegedly improper political content of their messages.

The rest of the population can connect from a few state businesses that have access to email and, to a lesser extent, directly to the Internet from the approximately 160 state-run cybercafés for about US$4.50 an hour, although the average monthly wage is around US$20. Some hotels have Wi-Fi, but users are forced to pay the cost of connection and purchase beverages or food in these establishments.

Advertisements and US explorations

Among the first steps taken regarding telecommunications between Cuba and the US was an agreement signed in February by IDT, based in New Jersey, and Cuban telecommunications monopoly ETECSA to directly connect telephone calls between the two countries. A call from the US to Cuba now costs about US$1 a minute because the calls have been triangulated through other countries, such as Italy or Spain. Rates are expected to drop.

Netflix announced this year that it would provide service to Cuba. However, few Cubans with fast connections will be able to stream content from the service since credit card use in the country remains frozen. MasterCard announced in January that it has unlocked its services in Cuba.

US experts believe that Cuba has real potential as a future customer for the Internet and faster cell phone service, which would provide US companies with trade opportunities when permitted by the Cuban government. Press reports say that was the impression of a delegation that visited the island in late March, led by Daniel Sepúlveda, deputy assistant secretary of state and US coordinator for international communications and information policy in the State Department’s Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs.

The delegation held meetings with members of the Cuban government, ETECSA, and independent Cuban bloggers. Bloggers have become a visible force outside the country, and some have their own training courses; their blogs are about the island, and some are linked to groups that are highly critical of society. Blogs have become a source of visual images and updated information about Cuba for the press and for academia outside the island (NotiCen, June 17, 2010).
Experts from Google have already made two exploratory trips to the island. The first visit was last summer by executive chairman Eric Schmidt and other representatives of the multinational company. The second visit was led by the deputy director of Google Ideas Scott Carpenter, Cuban sources revealed.

The second delegation met with students from the Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas (UCI) in Havana, an initiative founded by former President Fidel Castro in 2002 on the former Base de Lourdes, a military listening installation in Havana created by Cuba and Russia during the Cold War, in operation from 1964 until 2001. The creation of the UCI and computer training was part of Cuba’s strategy for its 'battle of ideas' to defend and promote its political system.

While these exchanges with US companies are happening, official Cuban news and information sites continue the same rhetoric of confrontation with the northern neighbor. Shortly after the Google Ideas representative visited the country, the Web site CubaDebate posted an interview with a supposed expert who stressed that Google’s plans were subversive and recommended that Cuba make use of technology offered by "allies" such as Russia and China.

**Free Internet and social networks**

Despite connection difficulties, Cubans make use of the Internet to sell their old cars and furniture. Sites like Revolico.com strengthen the boom in private marketing of goods and services outside state control. Similarly, listings for houses for rent to foreign tourists proliferate. This year, Airbnb, the Web site that advertises rentals in more than 190 countries, has included Cuban properties in cities like Havana and Cienfuegos.

The increased use of cell phones, computers, and electronic messaging is a major political challenge for President Raúl Castro’s government. Young people on the island are making creative and bold use of the chance to freely circulate information, photos, and videos ranging from original commercials to public protests instead of using social networks and blogs sponsored by the Cuban government for the promotion of official speeches and to counteract "enemy campaigns."

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