

Cuba's Internet: scarce, expensive and still censored

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Cuba's expanding internet access is but a small step toward progress.

Cuba still lags far behind its Latin American counterparts on internet access, despite this week's announcement that the government will provide Wi-Fi access to 35 state-run computer centers. Since the country's first, humble 64kbit/s connection was established in 1996, not much has changed. Only 3.4 percent of Cuban households are connected, and a mere five percent of the population has occasional access to the Web, thanks largely to state agencies, foreign embassies and black market deals. As a result, it's no surprise that the country continues to rank as having one of the world's most repressive climates for information and communication technologies.



Internet usage has increased by over 100 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2008, where 44 percent of the population enjoyed regular internet access in 2014 (figures that align with worldwide trends in connectivity). In Cuba, however, the government's telecommunications monopoly, ETECSA, strictly regulates citizens' network access. The majority of Cubans are only allowed to see a kind of intranet, which mostly comprises a Cuban encyclopedia, Cuban websites, a national email network and foreign websites that support the Cuban government.

Barriers to internet access in Cuba are not only a question of political will and weak infrastructure, but also of affordability. Thursday's announcement revealed that, in July, the hourly price of internet access will be reduced from \$4.50 to \$2—a price that remains highly unaffordable for most on the island.

Improving internet access is among the most pressing issues for both sides in the historic rekindling of U.S.-Cuba relations. The Cuban government maintains that the U.S.' half-century trade embargo is largely to blame for the nation's connectivity woes. Cuba has had to rely on an expensive, weak satellite system because U.S. telecommunications companies have been banned from doing business with Cuban providers. However, as the icy relations continue to thaw, the Cuban telecommunications sector may see opportunities for expansion. U.S. telecommunications firms were legally allowed to enter into contracts with Cuban providers after President Barack Obama updated the U.S.' policy approach toward Cuba in 2009.

If global trends in the region are any indication, the changes the Cuban government has made in the telecommunications sector, though small, may help increase democratic values in the country; a 2013 AmericasBarometer survey revealed that an increase in internet usage correspond with increased political tolerance.

Critics claim that Cuba's low connectivity is largely a result of the government's fear that internet access will lead to social upheaval. While it is unlikely the Cuban population will instantaneously adopt a revolutionary spirit simply because of wider internet access, some degree of change can be expected. Thursday's announcement should not be viewed as a litmus test for progress, but rather taken for what it is—a small step in the right direction, requiring the patience of all.

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