

Cuba

Internet use is severely restricted in Cuba. A combination of Cuban government policy, the U.S. trade embargo, and personal economic limitations prevents the vast majority of Cuban citizens from ever accessing the Internet. The few who gain access are limited by extensive monitoring and excessive penalties for political dissent expressed on the Internet, leading to a climate of self-censorship. Access probably is restricted even further by the U.S. government's sponsorship of reverse filtering, which encourages Web sites to prevent access from Cuba and other countries.



Internet in Cuba

In October 1996 Cuba first connected full time to the Internet, and in 1998 Cuba had only a single 64-Kbps satellite connection run by Sprint in Florida and allowed by an exception for communications to the U.S. trade embargo.¹ More recent legislation forbids U.S. investment in Cuban telecommunications and hampers acquisition of Cuban IP addresses; these policies, as well as Cuba's own economic policies, have hindered connectivity.² Currently Cuba still uses its satellite connection with a 65 Mb/s upload bandwidth and a 124 Mb/s download bandwidth for the entire country.³

In 1998, out of a population of eleven million, approximately 200 government-approved scientists, medical researchers, and government officials had Internet access from their desktops and 5,000 had e-mail addresses, used on Cuban intranets that remained entirely within the country.⁴ By 2000 there were 6,000 computers linked to the Internet and approximately 80,000

Cubans possessed e-mail accounts, but only half of those accounts had full Internet access—accounts were selectively granted by the government, and development focused on government and tourism efforts. The country had only a single Internet café and banned personal computing purchases.⁵ Currently Cuba has approximately 480,000 email accounts⁶ and 190,000 regular Internet users (less than 2 percent of the population).⁷ The cost of public Internet access (approximately USD4.50 per hour, or half the average monthly wage) and the very slow connections prohibit most Cubans from using the international Internet connections; most Cubans choose the national intranet instead (approximately USD1.50 per hour).⁸ In 2005 Cuban computer ownership was 3.3 per 100 inhabitants.⁹ An unknown number of Cubans illegally access the Internet through black market purchases of access or illegally shared authorized connections.¹⁰

Although the Cuban people primarily use connections to send e-mail, the Cuban government hopes to use the Internet to spread its political messages, promote tourism, and improve the efficiency of medical services.¹¹

ONI did not carry out empirical testing for Internet filtering in Cuba for this report.

KEY INDICATORS



Source (by indicator): World Bank 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Cuban executive branch controls governmental power, the law criminalizes dissent and permits imprisonment and surveillance without cause, and the court system lacks independence, preventing fair trials with adequate defense.¹²

Upon the arrival of a Cuban Internet connection, the government declared Internet access a “fundamental right” of the Cuban people.¹³ However, Cuban Internet use also has been restricted since its beginning, with the 1996 Decree-Law 209 requiring accreditation for Internet use and outlawing Internet use “in violation of Cuban society’s moral principles or the country’s laws” as well as e-mail messages that “jeopardize national security.”¹⁴ All Internet access requires government authorization, and the Cuban Ministry of Computer Technology and Communications has overseen Internet and computer use since January 2000.¹⁵

In 1998 the Centro Nacional de Intercambio Automatizado de Información (CENIAI) was the only Cuban Internet service provider (ISP).¹⁶ By 2000 the International Telecommunication Union reported full competition in the Cuban ISP market.¹⁷ This level of competition is a contrast to the monopolies in the various telephone, data,

and television markets;¹⁸ however, all ISPs were under government control and oversight, and of the ISPs, only CENIAI provided personal Internet access to Cuban citizens.¹⁹ All services, including ISPs, are subject to licensing.²⁰

In terms of hardware restrictions, purchases of computers were limited to foreign nationals and government officials in 1998.²¹ Since 2002, purchases by private individuals of computers, printers, and other hardware have been banned by a ministry of domestic commerce decree, and modem sales were banned earlier.²²

Reporters Without Borders considers Cuba “one of the world’s 10 most repressive countries [in regard to] online free expression” because of the highly limited access and the severe punishment of illegal Internet use, including “counter-revolutionary” usage.²³ The restrictions stem from the strong desire of the Cuban government to prevent attacks upon its political ideology from broad access to contrary views.²⁴

The restriction of access to the Internet as a whole is the most significant governmental control. In addition to government prohibition of private computer sales, the Cuban police have seized numerous already-owned private computers and modems, claiming that the machines

were illegal or were used against the government.²⁵ The lack of private materials forces most Cubans to use public access points. These sites generally require ID and registration, and many only access national e-mail and Cuban intranets; the government limits use of most hotel and cybercafé Internet connections to foreign tourists.²⁶ Additionally, the Cuban government openly prohibits the use of IP telephony.²⁷

The government further restricts Internet use by having all legal Cuban Internet traffic pass through state-run ISPs, which use software to detect politically dissident information.²⁸ This filtering includes the monitoring of e-mail messages prior to their being sent or received.²⁹ Tests and investigation by Reporters Without Borders found that very few Web sites are actually blocked from access, but e-mail and word processing programs automatically close for "state security reasons" upon detecting mention of dissidents or other politically sensitive issues.³⁰

For those who gain Internet access and use it illegally, the penalties are severe. In 2002 thirty-one people were sanctioned for improper Internet use or use of e-mail addresses that did not belong to them.³¹ Penalties for Internet violations include twenty years in prison for "counter-revolutionary" article writing and five years for connecting illegally.³² Twenty-four independent journalists currently are serving prison sentences in Cuba of up to twenty-seven years for Internet activity.³³

The harsh penalties and pervasive monitoring, particularly when combined with requirement of name and ID for access, makes free Internet usage difficult and dangerous. E-mail users restrict the contents of their messages because of fear of state monitoring.³⁴ Cuban Internet policies lead to self-censorship.

Reported reverse filtering by the United States

Historically the U.S. government has placed considerable emphasis on influencing Cuban

communications, creating specific policies for these technologies and spending considerable time and resources on anti-Castro radio and television programming, such as TV Martí.³⁵ The United States exerts some open control over the Cuban Internet, preventing U.S. investors from spending on the Cuban telecommunications market, requiring special U.S. Department of Treasury licensing for Cuban satellite connections, and prohibiting the direct sale of U.S. hardware and software.³⁶

However, the United States is also suspected of engaging in less-public controls by reverse filtering and the promotion of reverse filtering. In a memo of April 15, 1994, the National Science Foundation (NSF) included Cuba on a list of countries to block from using NSF servers, a policy reversed several months later under pressure from anti-Castro politicians who wanted to use information technology to sway the population against the Cuban government.³⁷ Although this particular block is no longer in effect, it does set a precedent for U.S. governmental interest in using route-filtering to prevent Cuban access. More recently, in 2004, a report was made of a private Web site being requested by the U.S. government to refrain from conducting business with Cuba, among other countries.³⁸

Conclusion

Cuba does not have the resources to provide Internet access for all of its citizens, particularly considering the higher prices caused by the U.S. trade embargo. However, the resources the government does devote to Internet development do not promote broad and open access. Government monitors, harsh penalties, and self-censorship discourage the transfer of politically sensitive information, and access is limited to government-approved individuals. The approved Cuban users may also be limited by reverse filtering. The Cuban Internet environment obstructs freedom of information and freedom of expression.

NOTES

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