Cuba mobile email experiment causes chaos

May 16 2014, by Andrea Rodriguez

In this May 9, 2014 photo, a cellphone owner shows the screen on his phone that reads in Spanish; "The configuration has not been able to finish. Cannot connect to server.," as he tries to connect to the Etecsa server while waiting with other customers outside the offices of the state telecom monopoly Etecsa in Havana, Cuba. Etecsa has issued a rare apology and eased the connection problems somewhat in recent weeks for the government offered mobile email service called Nauta. But Nauta's problems remain a rare window into the world of the Internet in Cuba, where service has been achingly slow since arriving in in 1996, leaving the country virtually isolated from the world of streaming video, photo-sharing and 4G cellphones. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)

On an island where most people have no Internet access, the arrival of

mobile phone email service was embraced with joy. Tens of thousands of Cubans began emailing like crazy in March—for days, until the service started to fail, taking much of Cuba's already shaky voice and text-messaging mobile service down with it

The island's aging cellphone towers became swamped by the new flood of email traffic, creating havoc for anyone trying to use the system. Users had to make eight or nine attempts to successfully send an email. Even voice calls by non-subscribers' began to drop mid-conversation. Callers sounded like they were phoning from the bottom of the sea. Ordinary text messages arrived days late, or not at all.

Since then, the state telecom monopoly Etecsa has issued a rare apology and the troubles have eased. But problems with the service, dubbed Nauta, offer a rare window into the Internet in Cuba, where the digital age has been achingly slow to spread since arriving in 1996, leaving the country virtually isolated from the world of streaming video, photo-sharing and 4G cellphones.

Cuba's government blames the technological problems on a U.S. embargo that prevents most American businesses from selling products to the Caribbean country. Critics of the government say it deliberately strangles the Internet to halt the spread of dissent. Other observers offer a less political explanation: a government desperate for foreign exchange is investing little in infrastructure improvements while extracting as much revenue as possible from communications services largely paid for by Cubans' wealthier overseas relatives.

Experts say that last explanation appears to be the primary culprit in the case of Nauta, in which the government tried to open connections with the world but floundered due to apparent poor planning and underinvestment.

"Cuba is extremely broke," said Larry Press, a professor of information systems and expert on Cuban telecommunications at California State University, Dominguez Hills. "If they had access to tons of capital they would probably expand (Internet service) further."

About 100,000 people—around 5 percent of Cuban cellphone users—had subscribed to the service even though it cost 50 times that of many U.S. data plans.

In this May 9, 2014 photo, people try to connect to the Etecsa server as they wait with other customers outside the offices of the state telecom monopoly Etecsa in Havana, Cuba. Cuba's government blames their technological problems on a U.S. embargo that prevents most American businesses from selling products to the Caribbean country. Critics of the government say it deliberately strangles the Internet to halt the spread of dissent. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)

Radio scriptwriter Lisandra Ayala, 36, stood in line for hours in March outside an Etecsa office, dreaming of zipping emails back and forth with her favorite cousin in Canada. Like many Cubans, she has long had a smartphone—a status symbol frequently brought in by visiting relatives.

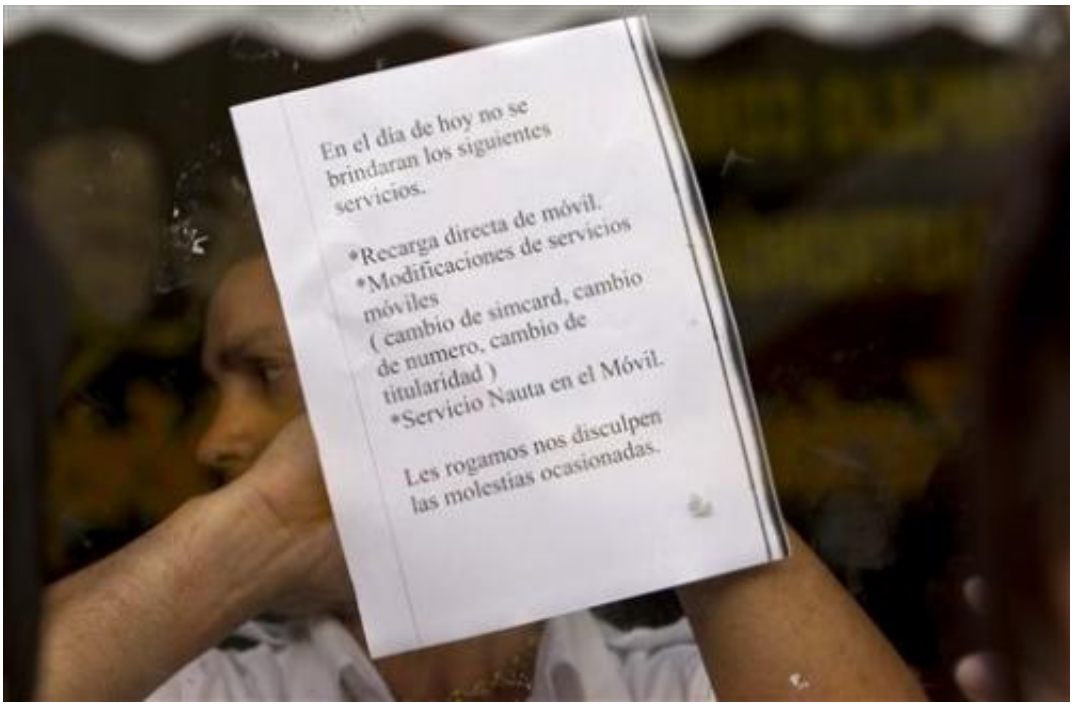
She paid $1.50 to sign up for a Nauta contract that was supposed to let her send emails with the ability to attach photos, but not send video or check the Web. Even the price of $1 per megabyte, many times higher than in virtually any developed country, didn't deter her.

"I was so excited at first, but then the experience turned into a total disaster," Ayala said. After a week of decent service, she found it impossible to open the icon for Nauta without trying at least six times; voice calls dropped or didn't go through and text messages disappeared mid-air.

"We have been preparing for more than a year," Hilda Arias, director of Etecsa, told official media late last month. "Customers' expectations really exceeded our vision ... this provoked an overload."

She promised that the situation would improve, albeit slowly.

With cellular rates as high as 35 cents a minute for domestic calls, Etecsa earned roughly $500 million last year, revenue that's been rising slowly since 2008, according to Emilio Morales, a systems engineer who heads the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group, a private consultant that analyzes Cuba's scanty public information about government revenues and operations to produce estimates widely considered reliable by Cuba-watchers.



In this May 9, 2014 photo, a worker from the state telecom monopoly Etecsa posts a sign on the office window that reads in Spanish; "Today we don't offer the following services: add cell phone minutes, mobile service modifications (change of simcard, change of number, change of phone owner), Nauta cell service. We apologize for the inconvenience.," in Havana, Cuba. Some attribute Cuba's technological problems on a government desperate for foreign exchange that is investing little in infrastructure improvements while extracting as much revenue as possible from communications services largely paid for by Cubans' wealthier overseas relatives. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)

"There are few businesses in Cuba that work as well as Etecsa," he said.

The group's studies show that 54 percent of payments to Etecsa come directly from the Cuban diaspora. Morales believes Cubans pay much of the rest out of the estimated $2.6 billion a year in remittances from abroad. And, while most state workers only make $20 a month, a new class of roughly 400,000 independent businessmen and their employees also make heavy use of cellphones for advertising with text-message as

well as ordinary business calls.

Authorities here say they are trying to offer a range of new Internet services by year's end, including mobile Web access and unrestricted home Internet access, currently limited to select government officials and employees of foreign businesses and embassies.

But customers remain wary.

"Nauta failed and stopped the whole mobile communication system from working properly," said Indira Perez, a 24-year-old university employee "If they don't prepare themselves better when they want to broaden Internet access, it's going to be total chaos."

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