

Cuban post offices OK'd for Internet access

September 9 2009, By WILL WEISSERT , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Cuba has authorized public Internet access at post offices across the country, though it has yet to apply what would be a landmark loosening of cyberspace rules in a nation where information is strictly controlled.

A decree posted on the Web site of the government's official gazette this week authorizes Empresa Correos de [Cuba](#) to "provide access to public Internet to all naturalized persons."

Many post offices already offer public computers, but they are linked to a national intranet - an extremely limited list of Cuba-only Web sites.

Cubans there can send and receive international e-mail, but direct access to the rest of the Web is blocked, limits far stricter than those imposed even in China or Saudi Arabia.

Internet supervisors at two Havana post offices said Wednesday that while authorities are preparing to apply the law and have even installed new, faster PCs in some locations, they did not know when the new rules will go into effect.

A spokesperson for the Cuban government was not immediately available for comment.

Even use of the national intranet is costly for locals: \$1.62 per hour in a country where state workers are paid about \$20 a month. It's not clear if full Internet access would cost more.

Few Cubans are able to pay the roughly \$6.50 that an hour of Internet time costs at hotels meant for foreign tourists.

More common - but still rare - are those with access to Internet-enabled computers owned by government officials, academics, Communist Party leaders and foreigners who work on the island. Even there, the government often blocks sites it considers hostile - especially those of Cuban bloggers who criticize the communist system.

Sitting on a curb across from a post office amid the gracefully decaying colonial buildings of Havana's historic district, Fidel Danilo Gomez said he expected to wait two hours for chance to use a computer linked to the intranet.

"We Cubans are crazy for waiting. If there's no line in Cuba it's because the place is closed," said the 21-year-old university student majoring in French.

But he said the idea of logging into the real Internet was appealing: "If I am going to wait for hours, checking a Hotmail or Yahoo account sounds better than using a Cuban account that's good for nothing."

Gomez said that though expensive, Cuba's internal Web is simple and runs quickly, helping to limit the time users have to be connected. The full Internet would run slowly and be even more costly, he said.

"It is very expensive even now, and most people can't afford it," said salsa singer Alexi Perez, who was chomping on an unlit cigar as he waited near Gomez to crowd inside the dimly lit post office and e-mail a friend in Croatia.

Perez said he'd love to surf the Internet for information about music, but isn't sure how to do that.

"All I know how to do is sit down, write my letter and leave," he said.
"And I'm a very slow typist."

Another potential problem is bandwidth. Cuban officials say they limit Internet access largely because the U.S. embargo forces them to rely on expensive satellite link to the Web rather than tapping into nearby American fiber-optic lines.

The government of Venezuela says it is nearing completion of a fiber-optic link that will greatly increase Cuba's Cyberspace capabilities. And the U.S. government recently relaxed restrictions on telecommunications cooperation with the island.

Gomez said e-mailing his friend in Croatia provides a peak at an outside world he's never seen.

"Everybody in Cuba wants to go somewhere and see something of the world," he said, "even if it were Guantanamo Bay."

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