

# Havana's small community of Twitterati meets IRL

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Bloggers participate in the first meeting about twitter social networking in Havana, Cuba, Friday July 1, 2011. A few dozen members of Cuba's small but growing Twitter community met for the first time Friday, connecting strange faces to familiar usernames and commiserating about woeful Internet access on an island with the second-worst connectivity rates in the world. The decades-old U.S. economic embargo has left Cuba without a hardwired connection to the rest of the world, and the island relies on slow, costly satellite service. Tweeters expressed hope Friday that an undersea fiber-optic cable to Venezuela that arrived here earlier this year and could go online this month will speed things up. (AP Photo/Javier Galeano)

(AP) -- A few dozen members of Cuba's small but growing Twitter community have met in real space for the first time. They got to put unfamiliar faces with familiar user names, and they commiserated about the woeful Internet access on an island that has the second-worst Web

connectivity rate in the world.

Gathering at a downtown [Havana](#) pavilion Friday, Cuba's Twitterati wrote their online handles on name tags emblazoned with the Cuban flag and the hash tag used to organize the event, TwittHab. One by one they introduced themselves, told of their history with [social media](#) and compared numbers of [followers](#).

"Many of us didn't know each other. This is about stepping out from behind the 'at' symbol," said "alondraM," who was only identifying herself by her username.

Next to her, "cuba1er.plan," a.k.a. Alejandro Cruz, said Cubans like him are increasingly using social media to share interests and information.

Their ranks are still relatively sparse because Cuba lags far behind the rest of the world in connectivity, besting only the Indian Ocean island chain of Mayotte, according to a report by the consulting firm Akamai Technologies Inc.

The decades-old U.S. economic embargo has left Cuba without a hardwired connection to the rest of the world, and the island relies on slow, costly [satellite service](#). The [Twitter](#) users expressed hope things will soon speed up now that an undersea [fiber-optic cable](#) to Venezuela has arrived in Cuba. It could go online this month.

For now, plodding dial-up is about the only option - and even those accounts have historically been hard to get and prohibitively expensive for most Cubans. The government says it must use its limited bandwidth carefully and gives priority to usage with what it deems a social purpose.

Cuba's National Statistics Office reported last year that just 2.9 percent of islanders said they had direct Internet access, most through their

schools and [workplaces](#), though that number doesn't reflect the black market sale of minutes on dial-up accounts.

The real figure is more likely between 5 percent and 10 percent, said Ted Henken, a professor of sociology and Latin American studies at Baruch College in New York who has traveled to Cuba frequently and is writing a book on social media and civil society on the island.

It all creates unique challenges for tweeters in Cuba. For one thing, their local audience is relatively small. Also, cost and availability limit how much time they can spend connected. And while Twitter is popular in other nations among smartphone-toting technophiles, limitations here mean most Twitter interaction happens on computers.

When users here want to send a tweet from the field, they send a cellphone text message to an overseas number that converts and posts it, said Mario Leonart, a 36-year-old from Villa Clara known online as "maritovoz."

It's expensive: \$4 for the initial setup, plus \$1 per tweet. Send 20 tweets and you've already equaled Cuba's average official monthly salary.

Some get around that by hitting up followers abroad when they start to run low on funds, Henken said, citing the case of one tweeter he monitors.

"Like most Cubans he doesn't have a whole lot of money to be able to do this, but he tweets all the time," Henken said. "So he must have this feedback from people who follow him, because they put money in his account."

Nevertheless, Henken said, Twitter's immediacy and the fact that Cubans are learning to take it mobile are creating an incipient "new

narrative" that at least has the potential to challenge state domination of information.

"Just like in the rest of the world, it can be used as a form of pushing back against the mainstream media - and, of course, in Cuba the mainstream media is the official government media," Henken said. "So it does act as a corrective on what's happening or gives another version of events."

For a little more than an hour Friday, the tweeters talked about strategies for staying connected and dreamed aloud about having Internet in their homes.

The event was organized by Leunam Rodriguez, a 26-year-old radio station employee who has been tweeting for just a few months.

Rodriguez, who doesn't fall into either the pro- or anti-government camps, pitched the meet-up as an apolitical gathering.

But when the venue was moved from a pizzeria to the Cuba Pavilion, Yoani Sanchez, known internationally for her blog writings opposing the government, complained that the meeting had been "kidnapped" by officialdom. Ultimately she skipped both the gathering and the handful of tweeters who met at the pizzeria.

Rodriguez denied that the site change was politically motivated.

"I've said that I don't belong to any organization. I'm just a Cuban," he said.

Henken said tweeting in Cuba will involve politics, no matter what individual tweeters might want.

"I think Twitter is political even when it's not political," he said. "The (Cuban) system is very monolithic; therefore even if you use Twitter to promote a sewing circle ... it's political because it is unfiltered."

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